

Banana Republic?

By Dr Steven McCabe, Associate Professor, Institute of Design and Economic Acceleration (IDEA) and Senior Fellow, Centre for Brexit Studies, Birmingham City University

“Banana Republic” is the 1980 single from new wave act, The Boomtown Rats and taken from their album *Mondo Bongo*. “Banana Republic” was written by lead singer, campaigner, entrepreneur and generally rambunctious Dubliner, Bob Geldof, in collaboration with bass player Pete Briquette, real name Patrick Cusack, who’s from Ballyjamesduff in County Cavan; not far from where my parents were born.

Ballyjamesduff is famous for almost nothing apart from being winner of the 1966 and 1967 Irish Tidy Towns Competition and being part of a song by acclaimed polymath and entertainer Percy French (1st May 1854-24th January 1920). Having travelled through the town more times than I care to remember, especially when my family moved to neighbouring town Oldcastle in September 1974, I can see why the lyrics of “Banana Republic” are so excoriating about the Ireland of the 1970s Geldof and Briquette experienced and were keen to escape.

Ireland of the 1970s, as had been the case for decades, had a grim record in many respects and poor employment prospects outside of the capital. Hence the waves of immigration that included my parents.

“Banana Republic” was written in anger at being banned, because of, in particular, Geldof’s denunciation of overweening Catholicism in Ireland as well as expressing the belief, shared by almost everyone I talked to at the time, a ‘system’ that utterly stank and was controlled by corrupt politicians who ensured it operated in favour of them and their cronies.

If you’ve never heard “Banana Republic” or read its lyrics, do so immediately. It contains some of the most trenchant criticism contained in any pop song I can think. It includes the lines, “The purple and the pinstripe [the former in reference to clergy Geldof famously described in a 1977 television interview as “medieval-minded”, the latter being the dodgy businessmen who operated on the basis of ‘brown envelopes’ (bribes to politicians)], Mutely shake their heads,” who the song continues, “Stab you in the back yeah, Laughing in your face”

As a 13 year-old who lived in Ireland in six months in the 1970s, I can attest to the accuracy of the of the message contained in “Banana Republic”. Nationalism was used as a cloak of respectability by the likes of [Charles Haughey](#), who dominated Irish politics in the 1970s and 80s.

Though being in part responsible for the economic transformation of Ireland in the 1980s, a country whose main export had previously been its young people, the late Haughey is remembered for involvement in corruption, embezzlement, tax evasion and the fact though proclaiming adherence to Catholicism, being engaged in a 27-year extra-marital affair.

The Republic of Ireland had, until relatively recently, especially in terms of politics, an image problem. Though it may have been the so called ‘Celtic Tiger’ in the 1990s and 2000s, Ireland’s politicians clung on to the old ways that had served them so well in ‘lining their pockets’ with cash.

The consequences of the fallout caused by the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 was calamitous for many in Ireland. Having experienced a property boom, in the immediate aftermath of the ‘credit crunch’, property developments ceased. Combined with job losses, hundreds of thousands discovered they were paying mortgages on properties worth far less than they’d paid (negative

equity). Many on new developments had to endure years of living on partially completed estates. What became known as 'ghost estates'.

Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger by the always excellent Fintan O'Toole, is a brilliant analysis of how the economic revolution commenced by Haughey – allowing low taxes and light regulation – went hand-in-hand with what verged on a 'wild west' attitude by developers. Such developers, almost always men, had a propensity to utilise the system of 'brown envelopes' matched only by the voracious appetite of certain politicians to take them.

Reviewing *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger* in *The Guardian* in 2009 when it was published by Faber and Faber, academic and writer Terry Eagleton, makes the point that between 1994 and 2006, house prices in Ireland rose by a staggering 519%; "probably the biggest such boom on the planet".

Ireland's boom and, crucially, recovery has been assisted by membership of the European Union. It may be judged against Japan's experience in the late 1980s when, Japanese corporations, hugely benefitting from the economic miracle brought about by superiority in automotive and electronics, and combined with low interest rates and loose monetary policy, made land in that country the most expensive in the world.

Real-estate prices across Japan rose 600-700%. When the asset bubble burst in 1990 land and property prices dropped dramatically leading to what's known a 'Lost Decade' (*Ushinawareta Jūnen*) of economic stagnation between 1991 and 2001. Indeed, Japan has never fully recovered.

Anyone who knows the Japanese system will attest to the fact that there generally a low incidence of corruption in Japan. However, as the [commercial organisation](#) Gan points out, "there is a traditional practice (known as *amakudari*) of assigning retired government officials to top positions within Japanese companies." This is not to say that companies benefit. Unfortunately, though, there's always the suspicion that officials are aware of, to use the parlance, knowing where one's 'bread may be buttered' in the future.

Fintan O'Toole in his book about Ireland, described a culture in which 'old ways' and backscratching allowed corruption there to flourish. As O'Toole contends, though everyone knew it was going on, nothing was done to punish those involved. Blowing the whistle on malfeasance being seen as unsporting; even unpatriotic.

Recent elections in Ireland have shown the rise in popularity of political parties explicitly dedicated to exposing and rooting out corruption. Cronyism, though not entirely eradicated, is under threat. Crucially, Ireland, characterised by a young and well-educated population, has in the last decade shown itself to be a progressive and outward-looking democracy led by a *taoiseach* (Prime Minister) who's the son of an Indian immigrant and openly gay.

The referendum votes allowing gay marriage and abortion, the latter after having framed the question to be asked through the use of what is known as a citizens' assembly, demonstrates commitment to tolerance and liberalism. The traditional closed-mindedness of the Catholic church has been swept away with breath-taking speed.

Equally, 'gombeenism', a word derived from its original form used to refer to those who exploited the starving during the famine, is no longer accepted. Those who engage in wrongdoing are pariahs.

Which brings us to the current state of chaos in this country under Boris Johnson.

It is increasingly hard to know where to start as to analysing how utterly appalling his stewardship has been. Having secured an 80-seat majority based explicitly on delivering the will of the people in promising to “get Brexit done” through his “oven-ready deal”, the very next day, he attended what [The Guardian](#) described as, “a caviar-fuelled Christmas party in London hosted by former KGB agent Alexander Lebedev and his son Evgeny.”

Not content with having celebrated his victory over Christmas, Johnson and partner Carrie then embarked on a [questionably-funded holiday](#) over the New Year in Mustique.

The serious business of running the country could wait.

As we now know, a myopia with passing the Withdrawal Act to allow the UK to leave the EU on 31st January effectively blindsided Johnson’s government to the impending threat of a once in a century global health pandemic that is Covid-19.

The list of mistakes by Johnson and his cabinet ministers increases daily. Too late into lockdown. Inconsistent messages confused those they were intended to inform. Lack of preparedness in care homes. Lack of protective equipment. Inability to strategise the impact of decisions taken despite having self-proclaimed genius and data expert, chief advisor to the PM, Dominic Cummings, to call upon.

The numbers, tragically, tell their own story.

The highest excess death toll of any country in Europe.

The greatest second quarter fall in Gross Domestic Product in Europe.

What we’ve witnessed is a willingness to offer ennoblements to friends and family including Evgeny Lebedev whose party Johnson attended and his brother Jo.

It is sadly inevitably depressing that Johnson is inconsistent. Writing in *The Daily Telegraph* on 30th January 2003, Johnson was critical of then PM Tony Blair using appointed peers, “cronies”, as “disgusting way to choose the revising chamber of a great and ancient legislature”.

The appointment of [Baroness Dido Harding](#), whose husband is Conservative MP John Penrose, to lead the newly formed Institute for Health Protection rather than someone with experience in medicine is the latest example of appointing chums into key jobs in which interdependence and integrity would be assumed to be vital.

In considering the way that Ireland is managing to move on from the bad old days the Boomtown Rats so acerbically sang about in 1980 in “Banana Republic”, it’s possible to make a contrast with what is happening in this country.

Arriving in Birmingham in the mid-1950s, my own parents faced the discrimination of seeing signs outside boarding houses reading “No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs”.

Thankfully, things have greatly changed in the last sixty plus years.

Reprehensibly, it seems, the attitude of Boris Johnson and those around him have not.

I am reminded of a twitter post made in July 2019 by former editor of *The Sun*, David Yelland referring to attitudes to then Irish PM Leo Varadkar who, having commenced on a Law degree, switched to medicine:



David Yelland
@davidyelland

I've been shocked at two dinners recently when Tories of influence have told me privately "Varadkar isn't bright" and "the Irish will blink" and it seems, amazingly, that this is the actual policy of HMG under Johnson. They are anti-Irish, arrogant, dangerous and wrong.

6:19 PM · Jul 29, 2019 · Twitter for iPad

It's worth noting that during the pandemic, [Varadkar re-registered as doctor](#) during Covid-19 pandemic so he could assist the Irish health service during the crisis.

Varadkar's example of being among the people has not been matched by Johnson, friend of the uber-rich and Russian oligarchs. Moreover, Johnson resolutely refuses to allow himself to be openly questioned by the press. Notably, he clearly found being questioned by Opposition Leader Sir Keir Starmer at Prime Minister's Questions over to his handling of the pandemic profoundly irritating.

It begs the question, which of Varadkar and Johnson is actively engaged in collaborative government of a country that, with alarming speed, increasingly resembles a Banana Republic?

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13:978-1694447807), contributor to *Boris, Brexit and the Media* edited by Mair, Clark, Fowler, Snoddy and Tait (published by Abramis Academic Publishing, ISBN-13: 978-1845497644), *The Virus and the Media: How British Journalists Covered the Pandemic*, edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8643725824), *The Wolves in the Forest: Tackling Inequality in the 21st Century* edited by Paul Hindley and Paul Hishman (published by Social Liberal Forum), *The Pandemic, Where Did We Go Wrong?* edited by John Mair (forthcoming to be published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8665858326) and *English Regions After Brexit: Examining Potential Change through Devolved Power*, jointly edited with Beverley Nielsen (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8666953099).