

The Department of Injustice

The following article by Residents Against Racism member Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh appears in the current issue of Resistance magazine.

Most of us would have to scratch our heads a bit to remember who Minister Brendan Smith was. If Joyce's character was right and history is a nightmare from which we're trying to escape, then the Cowen government already seems like a particularly weird hallucination.

Its last throw of the dice was an attempt to appoint people as ministers for seven weeks, and when this backfired, existing ministers had to double-job. And so, besides being Minister for Agriculture, Brendan Smith found himself Minister for Justice and Law Reform.

It was all in vain, of course. Although Smith was one of the few Fianna Fáil TDs to escape the electoral scythe in February, his ministerial career was toast. He hung on to both jobs for another fortnight until successors were appointed, however. On his last day in office, 8 March, before pulling the door shut after him, he signed two hundred deportation orders.

Let's look at the maths for a minute. Assume first of all that Smith left the Department of Agriculture to its own devices for the day, allowing Irish farming to fend for itself. Assume then that he worked from 9 am to 5 pm, with only an hour for his lunch and twenty minutes of a tea break — no time spent ringing his wife, hassling his secretary, or stealing stationery. If all that were the case, then the minister spent a whole two minutes weighing up the merits of each individual case before condemning every one of them to deportation.

Somehow, it just doesn't ring true, and there is a far more likely scenario: that a senior civil servant in the Department of Justice placed a huge pile of deportation orders on the minister's desk, and pulled each sheet aside as it was signed. The most Smith concerned himself with that day was a possible slight pain in the wrist. Pangs of conscience at the lives he was so blithely ruining seem unlikely to have troubled him.

Incidents such as these have helped propel Ireland to the top of the European league table for deportation. Fortress Europe turns away 73 per cent of people who look for asylum in the EU, but Ireland has the distinction of rejecting over 98½ per cent.

That figure is some achievement, and doubtless brings a burst of pride to the cheek of every racist in the country. Many asylum seekers have experience of dictatorships which rig elections as a matter of course, but even dictatorships rarely get away with figures as high as 98½ per cent.

So why does Ireland have such a uniquely unwelcoming asylum system? Simply because it isn't an asylum system at all but a deportation system: not a way of helping people who have had to get out of other countries, but a conveyor belt that does everything inhumanly possible to kick out as many people as it can.

It has taken the state a deal of effort to create such a monster. Those who adjudicate asylum applications are hired and fired by the Minister for Justice, and if they want more of this piecework they give the verdict expected of them.

Reasons for their decisions are kept from the public, but court cases have revealed adjudications where identical wording crops up again and again, and applicants are referred to by the wrong gender. Serial rejectors are clearly cutting and pasting the same text from one decision to another, not bothering to come up with original pretexts. Some notorious Solomons have dispensed with the pretence altogether, and simply turned down every single case that has come before them.

And enforcing these refusals requires a panoply of coercive powers, from the immigration bureaucracy that decides how long the threat of deportation hangs over people to the gardaí who lift people in dawn raids, bound for prison. The government claims it can't afford special needs assistants in schools, yet there are no signs of cutbacks here, and it manages to come up with the money for expensive deportation flights every month or two.

The frayed liberal credentials upon which Alan Shatter coasted to office have proved to be as worthless as a Roscommon hospital promise, as he sticks like glue to the cruel path carved out by his predecessors. The asylum system needs to be freed from him and his ilk, and the deportation machine dismantled.

In its place, we need an approach which recognises that people fleeing oppression or poverty are entitled to live and work here the same as everyone else. Of all the injustices left in the wake of the Celtic Tiger, the embedding of racism in the heart of the state apparatus is one of the most dangerous and insidious, and one which needs uprooting ruthlessly.