

Why there's a cute hoor in all of us

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Was our tradition of 'looking after our own' to blame for the banking crisis?

For students, the Easter break means a nice chance to kick back and relax before the pressure of summer exams. For their parents however, it means the start of a long search for that summer job for their children. Getting these jobs will almost certainly involve sussing out their own networks, their friends, family and neighbours, for those with connections to pubs, shops and hotels. Once these connections have been made, phone calls or chats will follow in an effort to ensure that their son or daughter gets summer work. The potential employer, let's call him Tommy, will be assured that Cian or Kate or Amy is a nice, well-mannered youngster from a good family, 'one of our own', and this communication will almost certainly deliver the all-important job.

What's the big deal, I hear you say? It's a win-win situation. The parents get their kids out from under their feet while Tommy, the employer, is assured that Cian or Kate is from a nice family (of traceable origin, to paraphrase Bord Bia). More importantly, these parents now owe Tommy a favour which he might be able to use in all kinds of interesting and useful ways. A web of contacts where favours are owed and returned is a very important resource for a local businessman or indeed, any local family in an Irish community. The fact that the kids of local immigrants cannot get summer jobs because they are all sewn up by the locals is not really considered, though this unforeseen consequence may cause lingering resentment amongst young local migrants.

This type of favour is a low-level stroke in Irish community life, one that does not involve bending or breaking the rules, but one that is rooted in the same core idea that 'looking after your own' is the most important form of good behaviour in Ireland. When we examine how this pattern works in Irish politics, we can see some of the problems it creates more clearly. Irish TDs spend over 50pc of their time on constituency work - fixing pot-holes, making representations for their constituents about medical cards, pensions, etc. Having interviewed politicians from across the political spectrum for my new book, *Rule-breakers*, I found they all agreed that constituency work was the key to political survival. One retired politician told me: "I've seen brilliant parliamentarians, religiously tackling legislation, line by line and word by word, and they lost their seats because they didn't do the constituency work."

In most cases, the voters I interviewed said that they were asking politicians for favours because they either didn't believe the rules worked or knew that relationships (pull) would get the job done more effectively. By and large, their assessment proved to be correct but I was surprised by how little they thought about the impact of these favours on everyone else. By bumping one person's name up the waiting list for surgery, everyone else has to wait longer. To me this seems unfair but the voters I interviewed weren't too worried. In justifying her use of pull to get a medical card, one woman told me "I don't really care whether other people can get them or not. All I know is that I need one and in our health care, those who shout the loudest seem to get what they want."

Irish voters were also very open about rewarding politicians who demonstrate that they are 'there' for them through favours and strokes. One man I spoke to explained: "Bottom line, if a guy is going to help one of my children get a job somewhere, or help me get a grant to do something, people are going to support him and vote for him regardless of what's going on at national level."

For both of these people, getting what they wanted, using their relationships, was entirely justifiable. If rules were bent or broken in the process, so what? They didn't view them as being that important anyway.

Considering our colonial history, this soft attitude to rule-bending and breaking is not really surprising. Many of the rules put in the place by the Dublin Castle regime in the 19th century were established to foster the interests of the British. Openly challenging these unfair rules was risky and high cost, a fact most clearly recognised by those who led the 1916 Easter Rising. In everyday life, ordinary Irish people developed the habit of tipping the cap, playing along with the rules but not really viewing them as morally important. Aside from their relationships to their families and communities where they 'looked after their own', the only rules to which they attached any real importance were those of the Catholic Church.

Ireland has been transformed since this time but the legacy of this soft attitude to rule-breaking remains. For instance, the most important question that the banking inquiry will have to answer when it resumes this month, is how Irish politicians could allow their willingness to 'be there' for their friends in the banking and construction sector dominate so completely over the interests of ordinary Irish citizens which were supposed to be protected by rules.

The strokes and favours which we use to get our children jobs, or our elderly parents medical cards are not in the same league as banking corruption but they are rooted in the same understandings, which have created a national blind-spot about rule-breaking. It's the 'cute hoor' gene in all us and maybe it's time we started to recognise it.