



HOLDING COURT Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch and Brock Peters as Tom Robinson in the 1962 film version of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

# I was taught to live by my own decisions, not those of my parents

**P**OLITICAL/CONSTITUTIONAL identity is a funny old thing. We all come into this world as a blank page. Who we are, how we view our citizenship, how we describe ourselves (unionist or nationalist, for example) and how we interpret history; all those things come later. And they come on the back of how we've been brought up, the opinions we hear from parents, friends and family and the events we live through. In other words, our political/constitutional identity is, primarily, the product of our upbringing and direct experiences.

Take my own case. I was adopted when I was six by a wonderful couple who rebooted and rebuilt me and opened doors that might never have been opened. My father was a member of the Ulster Unionist Party, Clerk of Session of a local Presbyterian Church and an officer of the Orange Order: the three pillars of unionism. Enough for some people to assume that he was probably a sectarian bigot. He wasn't.

But he was the man who gave me the best political advice I was ever given: "Don't think you have to carry my political baggage and views with you for the rest of your life. By the time you get to my age you'll have enough of your own baggage to carry. Live by your own decisions, not mine."

It was the advice he gave me when I told him, in 1974 when I was 18, that I supported Brian Faulkner's Sunningdale proposals on power sharing. He had his own reservations about the proposals, but he wasn't angry, nor tried to argue me out of my decision.

I asked him, shortly before he died, why he took such a 'liberal' approach to me in 1974. His answer was unexpected, in the sense that I'd never even thought about it before: "What would you have believed had you been adopted by another couple and brought up in

Alex KANE



an entirely different background"? It was a brilliant response. I've no idea what I would have thought about Faulkner and Sunningdale in those circumstances, because my upbringing and experiences would have been different. Utterly, utterly different.

I think that's why identity and the sense of who we are and who we want to be has always mattered to me. My son's middle name is Atticus, after Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "If you just learn a single trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it." He expanded on the theme later on, emphasising the importance of being in someone else's shoes,

*I was shaped by upbringing and experience, as we all are: but cautioned at an early and critical moment in my life not to carry baggage that it isn't my responsibility to carry.*

walking in their backyard and seeing yourself from their perspective.

So, what would have mattered to me had I not been adopted at all? What would have mattered to me had I been adopted by any of the other couples who were looking for children in 1960/61? What would have mattered to me had I not been brought up in a political household and meeting politicians from a young age? I was shaped by upbringing and experience, as we all are: but cautioned at an early and critical moment in my life not to carry baggage that it isn't my responsibility to carry.

When I hear or read comments from people, particularly young people, who say things like, "I was born a unionist/republican and I'll die a unionist/republican," I want to give them a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and tell them to imagine themselves in the shoes of someone who holds the opposite belief. Better still, I want them to sit down for an hour or so and ask themselves what matters more; the political ideology itself, or the inculcated views of parents, grandparents, peers and 'their' community. Or, putting that another way, who owns the baggage in their hallway?

As demographics continue to shift and electoral margins become increasingly knife-edged over the next few years, the united Ireland versus United Kingdom debate will intensify: as will the debate about personal identity. There are huge questions for both communities, as well as the 'agnostics' (who will, in the event of a border poll, have to make a call) to ask of themselves and of each other.

Megan, my eldest, 22, will have a vote when the border poll comes. Lillah, 11, may have a vote if it doesn't happen before October 2028. I'll tell them what my Dad told me: carry your own baggage and vote for what matters most to you.

## ON THIS DAY

FEBRUARY 19 1921

### Ex-Belfast Shipyard Boss Lashes Government

THE following letter appeared in yesterday's [London] Times: Sir, - Is it too much to hope that your article on Ireland this morning will at length rouse the moral conscience of the British people? The issue now raised transcends the question of Irish peace. The question for the British public to decide is whether the old traditions of honesty in public life are to be maintained or discarded. ... Thirty years ago statesmen guilty of the evasions in which the Prime Minister and Sir Hamar Greenwood [Chief Secretary for Ireland] have so frequently indulged would have been hounded out of office by the rising tide of public indignation. No wonder the leaders of Ireland place no confidence in the word of this Government.

Meanwhile the futile measures of repression continue in Ireland. Long ago I prophesied that they would fail. They have failed. They will always fail. For every Sinn Féiner you shoot, a hundred more will rise to take his place. You are merely teaching Irishmen to hate you, you are teaching them to despise you as men without honour or sense or shame. And this lesson is being learned, not merely in Ireland but throughout the civilised world which looks on in horror at this ghastly and awful tragedy.

There will be a better England as well as a better Ireland when the English people dismiss the unworthy stewards who have betrayed alike the interests and honour of England. - Yours faithfully A M Carlisle.

### Antrim Sensation - Sinn Féin Clergyman Arrested

EARLY on Saturday morning the military and police visited the house occupied by the Rev Dr Irwin, Presbyterian minister of Killead, near Antrim. The house was thoroughly searched and Dr Irwin was then taken away in a motor and lodged in Antrim police barracks. It will be remembered that the Rev Dr Irwin visited the United States last year and addressed many meetings on the Irish Question. (Ballymena-born Alex Carlisle (1854-1926) was the former manager of Harland and Wolff's and a brother-in-law of Lord Pirrie. He was a nephew of the liberal Presbyterian leader, Rev Henry Montgomery. In 1906 his intervention as an independent candidate in West Belfast allowed Joe Devlin to win the seat. By 1921 Carlisle, a member of the British Privy Council, was a vocal critic of British policy in Ireland as this letter reveals. Rev James Irwin (1876-1954) of Killead was a Protestant Republican who had toured North America in 1920 with President de Valera in support of an Irish Republic. He was court-martialled and sentenced to two years' imprisonment but was unexpectedly released after a few months.)

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX  
e.phoenix@irishnews.com