

Abstract from Professor Donnchadh Ó Corráin

Burren Law School, Friday 30th April 2010

The theme of the School—‘Power—its uses and abuses’—addresses a present and pressing problem, the failure of our State and of our political establishment. The State and its agencies—for example, the Civil Service, the Central Bank, the HSE, the State’s tribunals of enquiry, the universities, the multitude of quangos—are not fit for purpose: they cannot or will not do what they ought. And the whole system is deprived by political patronage, bloated, prohibitively expensive, and incompetent. Our political leaders rob the state: they corruptly and openly use its resources to enrich themselves and their cronies. The public good is subordinated to private gain, and re-election, not public service, is the aim of the politicians, that is, re-election to continue their plunder. The collapse of the commercial banks shows that the disease, that is, incompetence and dishonesty, has spread outside Government and its arms, but Government is deeply complicit in this failure, and in bumbling and dishonest plans to remedy it at the citizens’ expense. Our leaders and our bankers are financially and morally bankrupt.

Less than ninety years since the foundation of the State, we are staring collapse in the face. No time for minor improvements, no time for tinkering with failed systems, no time for jobbery under the name of reform, no time for political hacks in national leadership, no time for fools in power.

It is time to declare the Second Republic.

LECTURE

‘One of the most profoundly influential formulations of Christian political obligation in the entire Middle Ages’. So an eminent historian describes the text on politics written by Irish clerical thinkers about AD 650. Here they worked out an elaborate political morality. The king’s personal morality reflected his public morality. He had responsibility for moral government, justice, honesty, lack of corruption. He also had social responsibilities, to cherish the weak, the widow and the orphan. They believed that doing things right brought prosperity to society, abundant food, serene weather, social content, political stability. Evil rule and corruption brought poverty, famine, social disaster, and the destruction of the royal dynasty. The ideas also occur in a tract called ‘The Testament of Morann’, written in Old Irish, the earliest political tract in any European vernacular language.

Irish scholars brought these ideas to England and continental Europe, Irish lawyers and teachers went. The Irish scholar, Cathub, set them out in a letter to the Emperor Charlemagne (d. 814), written about 775: truth, patience, generosity in gift-giving, equity of judgement between rich and poor and other virtues will ensure tranquil weather, fertility of land and sea; injustice will bring the opposite including dissension in the family, pestilence, famine, defeat and loss of the kingship. His son, Louis the Pious (r. 814-40) took these principles very seriously.

They were expounded by Sedulius Scottus of Liège in his *Liber de Rectoribus Christianis* 'Book concerning Christian Rulers' written about 855-59 for the Emperor Charles the Bald. From here they became part of mainstream European political thought.