

Are We That 'Unsunny?'



Waterford city's inhabitants are not nearly so insular as outside perception might suggest.

I've worked in journalism long enough to know that if you want someone to say something to suit the tone and tenet of a piece, then, more often than not, you can elicit a quote to fulfil one's editorial obligation.

For example: "Sure it's not the road to anywhere. Except Waterford. That's why no-one's on it." These words, referencing the M9 motorway, were uttered by a lady named Anne in an Irish Times piece penned by Kathy Sheridan entitled 'The unsunny south-east'.

Published on June 6th, Anne also told Ms Sheridan that her mother would "probably have to go to Kilkenny for the frock" for her granddaughter's wedding due to the closure of Kelly's on The Quay.

Within days of that piece being published, it emerged that the former Kelly's premises would be re-opening, and I'd suspect that a journalist of Kathy Sheridan's experience would surely have known whom to speak to about such a potential re-opening. Right?

In the same piece, Ms Sheridan appears to make little of the €10 million investment that Penney's have made in expanding their John Roberts Square store, referencing it among those not considered "city-centre glamour magnets".

Try telling that to the thousands of Germans who flocked to the opening of Berlin's new Primark store recently, with the ceremonial tape being cut by Taoiseach Enda Kenny.

No-one living or working in Waterford is naïve enough to suggest that the past decade has been anything other than an economic endurance test for both this city and the south east.

But if one was to assess Waterford in the light that tends to be cast upon it by national journalists who drop by for a few hours, then one might see sense in bolting a chain at either side of Rice Bridge.

The one national broadcasting vehicle which has sought to portray Waterford in a slightly sunnier light, as indeed it has done for other economically troubled regions such as the north-west, is RTE's 'Nationwide'.

And it is no coincidence that in the vast majority of instances, the reports by Damien Tiernan and Helen McInerney have shown what locals are doing in this area, as opposed to fixating on what locals wish our region to have.

Both reporters live and work in the region and possess a genuine and heartfelt passion for the area; Damien is a selector on Gaultier's senior football team this season for example.

And while both are consummate professionals and realists about the region's current status, they know the strides that are being made, often discreetly, to buck the trend of the past decade. There's a lot of good work being done which, to be frank, national reporters don't give a damn about – the opportune quote is always the better line to run with.

To be fair, Ms Sheridan's piece does carry the thoughts of estate agent Des Purcell, whose comments on the IDA reflect what many of us on the ground in Waterford feel about their efforts – or perceived lack thereof.

"Where is the IDA? It must be the best-kept secret in Europe. They're abysmal. They moved their main office from here to Cork. And we have no clout at the cabinet table. There is a profound sense of anger in the business community that we have not got a fair crack of the whip. They say it's the CEO of a company that decides where to go, but isn't it an amazing coincidence that all the CEOs have such a passion for Cork."

What Kathy Sheridan also chose not to reference was the fact that the IDA, for the first time in three decades, has broken ground on a custom-built facility in Butlerstown. Again, one would have thought a reporter of her acumen might have thought this worthy of even a paragraph in her lengthy piece. But you'd have thought wrong.

Again, to be fair to Ms Sheridan, when talking to Frank Dolphin, she justly points out that perceptions of employee and union-led militancy in Waterford are, in fact, "baseless". Indeed they are.

Since the turn of the century, there's been no major strike anywhere in Waterford, something which cannot be said about Dublin, for example. Alas, the truth is rarely sexy in newsprint.

One of the first rules I was taught in journalism school about editing was to "cut from the bottom". In other words, the least relevant element of your copy ought to be in your final paragraphs.

It takes 35 'pars' – roughly 1100 words – into Kathy Sheridan's June 6th piece before one reads the following line: "There are shoots of hope". Thereafter, only seven paragraphs remain to be read. So what does that tell you about the editorial intention of the piece?

We Suisiders are not fantasists. We know how tough the past decade has been, Celtic Tiger and all, but are we really as insular and blinkered as is sometimes suggested from afar?

If that were indeed the case, would two Dublin-born men, namely John Hearn and Sean Reinhardt, have been elected as City Councillors? Would a proud Scotsman like Michael Garland have become a respected voice and representative of city centre retailers?

Would, in a sporting context, Tipperary-born Brian Flannery and Andy Moloney, and indeed ex-Premier star Colm Bonnar, have become so widely respected in Waterford hurling circles if we natives were indeed so parochially myopic?

Are we really, as Ms Sheridan's piece suggests (published in a newspaper edited by a Waterford native, lest we forget), that unsunny? Surely not.