

# Opinion & Analysis

## Does a rich Christmas have to mean a spending spree?



**JOHN GIBBONS**

Despite all the hype and cynicism, Christmas can still be a magical time of hope, reflection and renewal

THE WELL-DRESSED woman in the self-service restaurant in Newbridge last weekend spotted us, laden down with trays and young children, as we made our way towards a newly vacated table. Quick as a flash, she pushed her teenage son out of the queue, and into one of the empty chairs, while all the time fixing her icy stare into the middle distance.

No matter that she herself would be another 10 minutes in the queue. What was important was her convenience. Nor was she alone. At least two or three other tables in a modest seating area were being similarly hogged. Efforts by the staff to ask people not to hold tables were, we were told, met with dogs' abuse.

There seems to be a lot of this around. In the restaurant car park, a Range Rover had been abandoned by its owner in such a way as to cause the greatest possible inconvenience to everyone else.

President Mary McAleese touched eloquently on the rise of mé féin-ism this week. "I think that everyone of us would have to say with our hands on our hearts that we were all consumed by that same element of consumerism," she said. The economic

downturn, she suggested, has its silver lining in that "now we're trying to find our way back to a more rooted and possibly more modest time."

Recession aside, nowhere does egregious consumerism come into its own than over the Christmas, when Irish households will generate around 80,000 tons of used packaging alone. Repak says we will chuck out 159 million drink containers of all shapes in this period, with most of this detritus ending up in the septic infinity of landfill.

The Christmas spirit will be liberally imbibed via 90 million bottles and cans of wine, beer and spirits. Just wrapping the mountain of gifts (many entirely unwanted) will account for 4.5 million rolls of paper.

For the first time in at least a decade, as evidence of economic and environmental decline becomes impossible to avoid, more and more people are left wondering does a rich Christmas really have to mean a spending spree?

Happily, the answer is no, and neither do you have to be an Ebenezer Scrooge to keep a lid on the festive madness. Rampant gift-buying can be gently but firmly nipped in the bud within families and close friends by adopting the Kris Kindle or "secret Santa"

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idea of each person buying just one gift anonymously.

By taking off the pressure to buy bootfuls of gifts, you are saving both money and resources. Sustainability expert Gavin Harte suggests giving a voucher for your time, to commit to babysitting or helping out a friend. An idea with a personal touch is to take a photo, get it framed and give that as your gift.

Most people already have more than enough "stuff" from the factories of China; in these straitened times, bling is out, and originality is in. "Fair Trade" gifts also send out the right seasonal message, suggests Davie Philip of Cultivate.

If you are buying a more conventional gift, like a games console, it's worth noting that the Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3 both use as much electricity as running an extra two or three fridges in your house. Consider the Nintendo Wii instead; it uses far less power, so you can have fun with fewer emissions.

Whatever the gizmo, with only one in 100 batteries bought in Ireland being recycled, avoid disposables like the plague and plump for rechargeables instead. Even better, a wind-up LED torch means you'll never again be left in the dark with leaky old batteries.

The *Guide to Greener Electronics* from Greenpeace rates Nokia and Sony Eirsson as greenest, while Microsoft is the worst of the majors. Apple, in response to environmental lobbying, has eliminated mercury, arsenic, PVC and brominated flame retardants from its computers. If we as customers demand it, corporations will eventually do the right thing.

If you ever wondered how half of the world's entire wealth came to be owned by the richest 2 per cent, a couple of hours spent playing the popular board game, "Monopoly" and you may well have it sussed. Rumours that the Irish version has a special "get out of jail free" card for bankers, tax exiles and

property speculators are, like our financial system itself, entirely without foundation.

The best way to power down this Christmas is to curl up with a good book. If you're interested in some of the topics covered in this column during 2008, here, in no special order, are a few volumes worth a look (there's plenty more reading available online at [Climatechange.ie](http://Climatechange.ie)):

*Growth Fetish* (Clive Hamilton) – exposes the follies of conventional economics; *Six Degrees* (Mark Lynas) – a lucid guide to our dangerous century; *Straw Dogs* (John Gray) – a reality check on human hubris; *Ireland's Burning* (Paul Cunningham) – a timely survey from RTE's correspondent; *Heat* (George Monbiot) – an urgent, eloquent call to arms.

Finally, *Something New Under The Sun* (John McNeill) – a meticulously researched book that shattered this writer's uninformed view some years ago that the world was more or less on the right track.

Despite all the hype and cynicism, Christmas can still be a magical time of hope, reflection and renewal. And fun. Just ask any four-year-old. After all, isn't happiness more about wanting what we have than just having what we want?