

Opinion & Analysis

Time to discard our delusions and get real



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The antidote to wishful thinking is positive action, and it has been an unusually good week on this front

ALWAYS LOOK on the bright side of life" was the tune that concluded Monty Python's classic farce, *The Life of Brian*. The joke was, of course, that as they sang, they were being crucified, and their optimism was, let's just say, misplaced.

US author Barbara Ehrenreich was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2000. Frightened and angry, she was astonished to be bombarded from all sides with people insisting that she think positively. She recalls being scolded for the "negativity" of articulating deep fears and just wanting to cry.

One online support group described her cancer as a "gift" she should cherish. She then began to paddle against this upbeat guff. "Cheerfulness is required, dissent is a kind of treason," she recalls. Since everyone is so darned chipper, she asks, why do Americans account for two-thirds of the global market for antidepressants?

Ehrenreich's new book, *Bright-Sided*, was spurred by her experience with cancer. "That was my first exposure to positive thinking as an ideology. Here I was in a real crisis in my life, and people were trying to market pink ribbon teddy bears to me," she said.

"When bad things happen to people, you say: 'Well, it's really your attitude that has to change.'" It is, in a nutshell, your fault.

Shows like the *X Factor* fuel the fantasy

that anyone could, if they tried hard enough, be the next big thing. Positive thinking sounds innocuous, even benign, but it differs from cheerfulness or normal optimism in that it often extends to believing that the world is shaped by our wants and desires, and that these can be willed, genie-like, into existence.

One volume I recently saw in Waterstone's that peddled positivity was entitled: *Think Like A Winner*. It promised to "... give you the advantage over other people". And the rewards? "Winning the respect of others, clinching that promotion at work or winning in love, money and health." The unspoken corollary is that failure – in love, money or health – has nothing to do with bankers looting your pension fund, with HSE cutbacks or that you look after a child with special needs. It's because you are – whisper it – a loser.

Positive thinking has also infected the corporate world. Many business tomes are now muddy amalgams of management advice peppered with self-help slogans. The delusional power of positive thinking was articulated in this newspaper last Friday, in an article by a recruitment company executive that sidestepped the mountains of contrary evidence to conclude that "the long-term outlook for the economy is fantastic".

In *Generation Me*, psychologist Jean Twenge points out that "we simply take it for

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granted that we should all feel good about ourselves, we are all special and we all deserve to follow our dreams". Over the last 25 years, international studies have tracked a strong rise in narcissistic belief among young people.

This is expressed as a growing sense of personal entitlement and a decline in interest in wider society. It's no coincidence that this me-centred attitude shift occurred during the greatest consumer spree and sharpest ecological decline in history.

The antidote to wishful thinking is positive action, and it has been an unusually good week on this front. This morning sees the formal launch of Ireland's 10:10 campaign, (www.1010.ie). It asks one simple question: what if we each resolved to cut our emissions by 10 per cent in 2010? Also launched today is a report from the Environmental Protection Agency that punctures the popular myth that

climate change is somehow going to bypass Ireland, and offers expert guidance on how we can mitigate some of its negative impacts while adapting our infrastructure for an increasingly volatile climate.

What's missing from our national response to the threat of climate change is legislation. Without this, piecemeal efforts will be picked apart by vested interests. Ibec's myopic attack this week on the proposed new carbon tax is a case in point, amid hints that the Minister for Finance may already be back-peddalling.

Yesterday, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Change and Energy Security presented its Climate Bill. Committee rapporteur Liz McManus pointed out that as the Dáil debated a Bill to save the banks, "in this report, we set out a Bill that attempts to save the planet." Long-term corporate investment in low carbon technologies needs certainty, and only strong climate laws can provide this, irrespective of who's in power.

The Bill also seeks to make the Taoiseach personally responsible for achieving emissions targets so that Ministers impede its progress at their peril. With just 38 days to Copenhagen, Ireland has a chance to draw a line under our delusional last decade and face challenges with realism and, yes, optimism.

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