BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU!

George Orwell "1984"

Sean McGowan

With the introduction of Electronic voting at the last General Election in four of the country's constituencies, have we witnessed the beginning of the end of another human tradition, the frenzied career of the Tally-man. Here, Leitrim County Council member, Sean McGowan rates this new development of 21st Century Ireland and its significance through the thoughts of a typical tally-man.

Where is this going to end? I have lived for these precious moments for almost all my life. Get along with the daily chores as they have come no more than any mortal soul. The routine of breakfast, work etc. and then we look for that bit of excitement just to make life more meaningful. Almost everybody has this in some manner or means be it waiting for the football season to commence or the fishing or hunting to gear into full flow.

I have witnessed people waiting for this buzz knowing that my turn was perhaps just a couple of years ahead. Yes, I am a tallyman. The person who stands in the front line as the ballot papers are emptied from the black boxes and the anxious and wearied candidates wait for their fate to be almost decided by my eagle eye. Well it would appear that this bastion of counting is heading for extinction as the electronic voting has been introduced into this country for the last general election in four constituencies. Progress or what?

Of course we live in an age where we cannot survive without the microchip. Or can we? For me this is turning into a disaster but that, perhaps is a selfish perspective. I can look for something else to give me that unbelievable buzz you get as you score the winning goal in the cup final. For me the goal was always the thrill on the face of the candidate who had topped the poll on the basis of my tallies and those of my colleagues. The highs and the lows. Of course there were the candidates who had not fared so well but at least they had indicators on the way during those agonising hours of waiting as each box was opened to confirm or dash their earnest hopes. Is there still hope? Of course there is. His or her local box has yet to be opened. Surely it will make a difference. Often it has bridged the gap. As often it has made no appreciable difference. But at least there were the indicators. The human side to everything.

Where are we at now? At the mercy of a machine. People have and will continue to put themselves up for approval or slaughter on a periodic basis, be it local, general, European or presidential election. Go in, press the button and your vote is cast. The candidate might as well, or would be better off stay in the comfort of his/her home and wait for the cruel hand of fate to deal the elation or depression in one fell swoop. The balance of power, nationwide trends would all but be a non-event as the government of the day could stand or fall, and with it the careers of many

Election Wedding – Happy couple Deirdre McHugh & Ciaran McNulty take time out from the important business of getting married to cast their votes in Cloone NS.

Photo: Matt Kavanagh. The Irish Times

Eugene McSharry (left) & Paddy McLoughlin casting their votes in the Abortion Referendum at the polling station in the Ballroom of Romance, Glenfarne. In the background is Presiding Officer Seamus O'Rourke and Poll Clerk, Gerard Keaney.

be decided with not the semblance of a human touch, if you pardon the pun, bar that on the electronic pulse. If we were to look back briefly at the last general election we saw the utter devastation on the face of a defeated candidate, Nora Owen. Procedure dictated that all candidates were to be brought away from the madding crowd, so to speak, and told the outcome in private. Even this did not happen and Nora lost her Dáil seat in an instant without an inkling of what was to come in front of the glare of all. We know that this was not meant to happen this way, but the fact is that it did and it gave us a brutal measure of what lies in store.

So, it would appear that my days as tallyman are all but numbered. No more for me the banter in the pre-tally hall, the great cross party co-operation in ensuring that the tallies were as accurate as possible, the break in the local for a few pints as the count for real gets under way, the look at the watch to get back to hear the result of the first count, the sheer satisfaction as the result is read and I am within just a vote or three of the actual figures. A job well done and I am already looking forward to the next election. Or so I thought. I think I will be looking for something new to give me the buzz. Now where did I leave my pipe and slippers. Old Ireland is dead and gone. Welcome to the harsh realities of the twenty-first century my fellow and former tally-men. Another institution has been closed down in the name of progress. What will we have next? Electronic canvassing?

M O R N I N G
Patrick Anderson-McQuaid

Rays of dawn light
came to worship
your face
while I touched
your heart
with my gaze.

In my desire
of the warmth
between us
I wished to give
silent words
to tell of the love
where you find yourself.

Moments framed
to lie
close to you,
invisible touches
of my restrained
passion
under the songbird's
morning call.