**Why are we still turning a blind eye to Norris's past?**

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What sort of magic dust has David Norris been sprinkling that has the public, so many of his political colleagues and considerable sections of the media, apparently under some sort of a spell?

How else to explain the tolerance with which people have greeted his by now farcical bid to be Ireland's next president? I wrote at the beginning of June that my central reservation concerning Norris was his judgment, and that was on the back of his 'Magill' interview being rehashed.

It's worth pointing out that this was ahead of revelations concerning the letter of clemency he wrote to an Israeli court on behalf of his former partner Ezra Yitzhak Nawi in 1997. Nawi was convicted of the statutory rape of a 15-year-old Palestinian boy.

Since then, he has more than proven my original point concerning judgment, and gone on to ensure that the list of reservations is now considerably longer.

His large ego, which previously had seemed a part of his considerable charm, has simply served to allow him to continue with what is at best a delusional bid to be the next incumbent of Aras an Uachtarain.

The magical spell theory is as good as any to try and explain the hold Norris appears to have over so many. He has certainly not been held to the same sort of account as others would have been in a similar situation.

This holds true in relation to significant sections of the voting population, and similarly of the media. In Leinster House this week there were still many of his colleagues taking a 'poor-ol'-David' sort of attitude, including one who said that you could offer a explanation for his apparent views on sexual relations between older men and youths, because he was gay.

This is a view that drives a majority of gay men to despair because it blurs the boundaries between being a homosexual and a paedophile. Norris has been a pioneer of gay rights in Ireland but these last few months have seen him doing much harm to the cause.

If it were anyone other than David Norris, the dots would have been joined up here in a shot. He has been held to a far lower standard of account than, say, a bishop, if he had written a similar letter pleading for clemency, or anyone else who might be construed as being a supporter of the Catholic Church.

Add together, if you will, the senator's remarks in the 'Magill' interview with his interview in the 'Daily Mail' where he said, among other things, he did not believe in the age of consent; as well as his support of poet Cathal O Searcaigh concerning the nature of his relationships with teenagers in Nepal; and of course, the clemency letter. There is a pattern here, despite his protestations.

This is someone who writes a letter on behalf of a former partner looking for a more lenient view of his committing a statutory rape; someone who publicly takes up a case of support concerning a man (O Searcaigh) who was involved in what most people would regard as sex tourism; not to mention someone that gives apparently careless interviews to journalists on the subject of paedophilia.

Those who argue that Norris deserves the same kind of leniency as other politicians who wrote letters, for instance, on behalf of constituents, are choosing not to see the full context of the situation. This was all deeply personal to Norris and he chose, in writing to the Israeli courts, not to reveal the fact that he and Nawi had been lovers.

David Norris has dressed it all up in the clothes of academic discussion, romance, anti-gay sentiment, and right-wing smears, but the fact is that he is not at all "sound" on the question of what is and isn't sexual abuse, and that children (including those in their teens) need to be protected.

It has to be said that Ezra (as the nation now knows him) didn't sound too convincing himself when I heard him on Radio I last month. He expressed his regret concerning the 15-year-old and explained he had initially resisted but also said: "He was the guy who phoned again. He liked to come to my place. But he was underage, no doubt about it."

Much of the Ezra letters drama took place while I was on my summer holidays in west Cork, and it was all the more remarkable to see it played out in the media alongside a debate on the Government's introduction of mandatory reporting of sexual abuse.

Thrown into that mix was the excellent drama on the Brendan Smyth affair shown on RTE. As a reporter who covered that story from very early on, it was right on the button in its portrayal of what occurred, and the manner in which the church responded to the reports of abuse. It captured perfectly the devastation felt by the main characters -- the Belfast family where Smyth had married the couple, subsequently baptised the children, and then abused them.

When the 'Magill' controversy first emerged in this campaign, there was a temptation towards giving David Norris the benefit of the doubt, but as time went on and the pieces of the jigsaw began to fall into place it all added up to rather more than that. I don't understand how you could reel in horror at the Smyth drama, or feel disgusted at the details contained in the report into the Cloyne diocese, and go on to display any tolerance at all for someone who has a record of somewhat dodgy comments on the general issue of paedophilia.

This Presidential race hasn't even properly begun and already it's turning into an epic campaign, for too many of the wrong reasons. The news that Martin McGuinness is to run for Sinn Fein should give it the real competitive edge that has been missing.

From this vantage it looks like a very smart move for the party. No wonder the SF top table looked so hugely pleased with themselves at the Shelbourne Hotel press conference during the week.

Now on top of the paedophilia storm we will have debate centring on having a man in the Aras who admitted to being a leading light in the IRA. In both cases though they should be allowed to run if they wish. But God forbid either would ever be our president.

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