

# Repaying to the last

*Clever banking ads disguise the reality for many*



AIB's 'The Last Repayment'



by Tony McKiver



If the O'Sullivans are the salt of the earth, then AIB is the Holy Ghost floating above and vouchsafing their happy life

**O**N ITS own terms, AIB's recent ad campaign, 'The Last Repayment', marking a couple reaching the end of their mortgage repayments, is a triumph. Created by advertising agency Rothco, the campaign is found online, in social media and in print, but the key component is a TV ad that focuses on Kate and Mick O'Sullivan, a couple reflecting on life in their home and celebrating the end of their repayments. The campaign's success is evident in the fact the O'Sullivans have made an impression in the media beyond the advertising space and airtime for which AIB paid directly, including an interview in *The Irish Times* and their ongoing meme-ification.

According to Patrick Ronaldson, Rothco's director of strategy, "Selling mortgages has become incredibly clichéd, with the picture perfect young couple enjoying the first day in their very own home; choosing paints, unpacking boxes, happily surviving without furniture. We turn all of this on its head by showing potential homeowners at the end of the journey". That's not to say that the ad is *not* targeted at "potential homeowners," it's just that its solicitation of them is subtle and indirect.

Bank of Ireland's recent commercials target precisely the 'getting on the property ladder' section of the market. In a light-hearted and ultimately evasive way, they also touch on some of the depressing realities of 'climbing on the housing ladder'. 'The Viewing' foregrounds the limitations of choice facing would-be homeowners in a situation where house construction lags far behind demand. A young couple waits on the street to view a potential home. With its red-brick skirting, this 1970s semi-D is pointedly *not* the glazed, minimalist box usually offered as the contemporary ideal in the media. Its inadequacy is highlighted by the couple's entry into a gaudily tiled and carpeted bathroom, with the dripping sound of faulty plumbing prominent on the soundtrack. The toilet lid lifts and the dingy looking fixture begins to sing Journey's 'Don't

Stop Believin'. The couple's faces transform to express model stoicism and hopefulness in the face of dispiriting reality. It's a fawningly flattering image of the bank's potential customers (debtors) as determined visionaries. Ultimately, the glorious promise of home ownership is redeemed in the final shot of the ad as the toilet and all other offensive traces of the home's previous ownership are driven away landfillwards. We don't see the minimalist glass box that's supplanted the 1970s semi-D, but we know for sure it's there.

Bank of Ireland's 'The Sandwich' spot celebrates the sacrifices people make to accrue a deposit, as office worker Tom suffers a dull ham sandwich while his profligate colleagues head out for a burrito. This time it's the miserable sandwich that breaks out into uplifting song: 'Don't Stop Believin'. Tom looks at some properties on his screen, and he smiles – home-ownership beckons.

Bank of Ireland's campaign is light and humorous, and explicitly targeted at potential homeowners, but I feel it loses out to AIB's more artful approach. For a start, the Bank of Ireland ads sail a little too close to the real problems we associate with the current property market, including limited housing stock, the challenge of amassing a deposit, and the headaches of renovating an older building. By putting the focus on the final repayment rather than the early days of home ownership, AIB offers implicit assurance that all of the hurdles you will face can be overcome. It doesn't dwell on the immediate pains of setting out to buy a home.

But the campaign doesn't tell us anything about AIB's mortgage offers, about the conditions of repayment, about the procedures for rescheduling repayments in the event of falling into arrears. Instead, it targets emotions. With a palette of nostalgia, pride, and wistfulness, it paints a picture of hope, effort and dedication being rewarded. Old photographs of the

O’Sullivan’s children are projected onto the walls of the house, so that the idea of the family and the home are fused visually.

Where is the bank in all this? Clearly, the campaign strives to create a positive association between the services offered by AIB and the fulfilment of the basic hope of having, and successfully raising, a family. We are encouraged to associate the mortgage – that part actually provided by AIB – with the lifetime accomplishment of the O’Sullivan’s, building a home, raising their family, repaying their debts. In one version of the commercial, Mick narrates, “There were challenging times, but we knew we’d come the road together”. Kate adds, “We knew we’d make it work”. The O’Sullivan’s are referring to their own experience, but the commercial transforms the ‘we’ into the O’Sullivan’s *plus* AIB. If the O’Sullivan’s are the salt of the earth, then AIB is the Holy Ghost floating above and vouchsafing their happy life.

A range of values is inscribed in the ad. Perhaps some are unintentional, but they’re no less active for their serendipitous presence. Mick and Kate look hale and hearty, ready to enjoy a few decades of debt-free life. Kate is American. Mick is a Kerryman with an extravagant handlebar moustache that lends him the cowboyish air of actor Sam Elliot. They are somehow rural yet cosmopolitan. They are not run-of-the-mill. They are neither urban nor visibly pretentious, but they are also not philistines.

Given that someone picked them to exemplify something important in this ad, we may well nourish the suspicion that they are better people than you or me. There is footage of children at play that has the look of old Super 8 or early video, possibly staged by the agency. Staged or not, the message is not only that this is a home that allowed a family to grow, but also that the O’Sullivan’s are the kind of involved, conscientious people who went to the trouble of filming their kids and preserving the footage (remember when these were chores?), whereas we might, by contrast, merely wish we’d had the presence of mind, energy, expertise or inclination to do the same ourselves. (Some of these unstated values are captured well in a Waterford Whispers headline that spoofs the campaign – “Why Haven’t You Paid Your Mortgage Off Yet, You Waste of Space?”, Ask AIB Couple”).

The ad tells us that Kate and Mick were involved in

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redesigning and rebuilding their own home. This puts it a notch above the common-or-garden new-build. People often speak proudly of Ireland lacking a class system like that in Britain, but the truth is that signifiers of difference in social position, tribe and income abound. And they are at their most conspicuous in our attitudes to property. Just look at the popularity of a TV show such as ‘Room to Improve’ in which architect Dermot Bannon accompanies couples – it seems as if it’s always couples – on their journey to redesign their homes.

Part of RTÉ’s ‘Lifestyle’ offering, and sponsored by Bank of Ireland, ‘Room to Improve’ pushes precisely the same narrative buttons as the AIB campaign. Like all so-called reality TV, it has an identifiable plot: the couple has a budget and a vision for their building project – both of which, Dermot’s reactions inform us, are naïve, needlessly conservative, or utterly wrong-headed. The couple embarks on the project.

They suffer setbacks, encounter obstacles and find themselves at loggerheads with their architect over some feature of the redesign. The architect and builder also have a B-plot difference of opinion that allows us to see that builders regard architects as woolly dreamers and architects regard builders as pure brawn not to be trusted to think independently. Then dawns the weekly epiphany that they are really just symbiotic partners in servicing the homeowners’ vision. Ultimately, through persistence, a willingness to spend more than they bargained for, and a willingness to submit to Dermot’s vision – with allowance made for one or two face-saving personal touches playfully scorned by Dermot – the couple reaches the promised land of their new home.

The purchase of the new house publicly anoints the couple with desirable qualities. They have good taste and they have the class to see beyond settling for a new build, redeeming instead some piece of our architectural past. Their relationship is sanctified by their ability to contribute as equal partners, they are both modern and in touch with the past, they have the good sense to consult with professionals, and they either have money or are professionally reliable enough to be able to secure a mortgage from a lender. These might seem like laughably obvious qualities, but think of who gets excluded. How might these qualities be attained by the unemployed? By renters, Travellers, defaulters, the sick, couples breaking apart, or by households where money is controlled unequally?

What would a truly informative mortgage ad say? It



would surely spell out what monthly repayments would be for a variety of sums at present rates. It would graph changes to the value of property over the last 15 years, including separate indices for property in Dublin and its hinterland and what might be called the rest of the state. It would indicate the percentage of all mortgages in arrears.

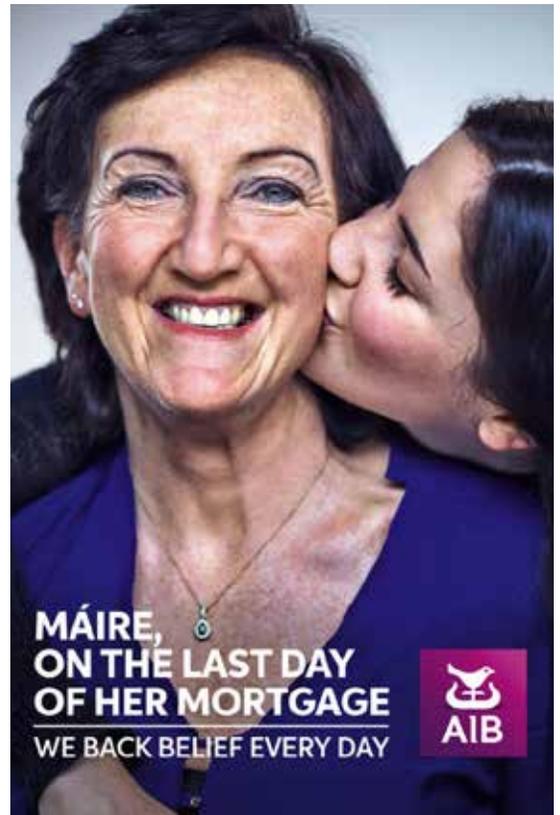
It's crucial that we see the O'Sullivan's achievement from its end point, when all risk has been removed. The ad completely glosses over the reality of a mortgage as a vertiginously monumental and hazardous burden. Instead of admitting the reality of our national personal debt crisis, acknowledging that we are vulnerable to fluctuations in markets and entities entirely removed from our daily lives, the campaign encourages us to see the successful repayment of the mortgage almost exclusively as an expression of personal character, a couple's own stick-to-it-ness and diligence. In the ad, Mick and Kate mention hard times, but we aren't told what these hard times entailed. We aren't told how they were overcome. We're not offered any perspective on the bank's interest in or indifference to these challenges.

Published on June 8, the Central Bank's Residential Mortgage Arrears and Repossessions Statistics for the first quarter of 2017 offer little grounds for breeziness or celebration, and plenty of evidence that many people in this country are still in the financial crisis that started in 2008. As of March 31, a total of 76,422 mortgage accounts for principal dwelling houses were in arrears. While the report continues a trend for the number in arrears falling, the number still represents 10% of all accounts. Of the group in arrears, 53,000 accounts (7% of the total) are over 90 days behind on repayments. If we consider these facts not in terms of abstract statistical improvements, but rather in the more personal terms that the AIB and Bank of Ireland ads and 'Room to Improve' seem to insist on, then the picture to be painted is *not* of effort rewarded, and accomplishments to be reflected upon. Instead, we

might project onto the walls of the O'Sullivan home images we more readily associate with stress, crisis, anxiety, pressure, depression, and all the day-to-day toil of living with and coping – or failing to cope – with mountainous personal or familial debt.

'The Last Repayment' asks us to look beyond every perilous step involved in acquiring and repaying a mortgage, to focus instead on the safe arrival to some unknowable point decades in the future when risk and debt no longer exist. It's like food advertising in which healthy, slim models bite down on a perfect burger. It's the same neutralising impulse that sees tampon absorption tested with blue liquid, health insurance paired with quirky stick-figure animation and comically bandaged limbs, and life assurance matched with images of perfectly healthy young families in carefree frolic.

A 2013 article in *The Irish Times* stated that AIB had between 1,200 and 1,300 employees dealing with repayments and debt arrears, and a later article in the



same paper names AIB as “by far the most aggressive Irish bank of 2015 in terms of chasing customers through the courts”. Teams of arrears collectors compete to collect the most on a given day, with the result that Ireland's considerable store of largely bank-generated human misery is being exploited anew by the same bank in a fresh cycle of commercial opportunity.

AIB knows that behind the tidy portrait of two silver-haired debt-free retirees there is a darker, contrasting mural crammed with a sea of worried faces. It's scarcely surprising that a commercial institution has decided to turn away from this spectacle in its bid to drum up new business. Our ongoing acceptance of this form of anti-septic address and the popularity of 'Room to Improve' suggest that, at least as viewers, we have also tacitly decided that this grim picture is not fit for public consumption. **L**

*Tony McKiver is a writer whose work has appeared in The Guardian, The Irish Times and The Quietus.*



Think of who gets excluded - the unemployed, renters, Travellers, defaulters, the sick, couples breaking apart, households where money is controlled unequally



The 2017 Annual Seamus Deane Field Day Lectures will be on the theme of 'The Right to Have Rights' for immigrants in Ireland.

Two lectures will take place: the first of these will be given by Dr Bryan McMahon, in the Aula Maxima of the National University of Ireland, Galway, on Saturday 14 October 2017 at 7pm; Dr Conor Kenny of MSF will deliver the second lecture at the Playhouse in Derry, on Friday 20 October 2017, also at 7pm. Check [fieldday.ie](http://fieldday.ie) for details.