

# DIARY

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Dublin

It's strange how you see things differently when travelling overseas. At a recent business conference in Ireland, the talk turned to politics. The chances of the Prime Minister at the forthcoming September election were keenly discussed. She has her detractors. Some of her opponents say disgusting things about her. But the audience gave her credit for leadership and toughness under great pressure. 'Without her things would be much worse. She is head and shoulders above her [male] opponent.' She has never had children. She is an easy target for sexism and even misogyny. Yet she doesn't play that card. She is running on her record. She is someone the feminist lobby in Australia could really look up to. Except for one thing. Angela Merkel is on the conservative side of politics. Our feminist panjandrums are more interested in promoting left-wing politics than women.

It is a busy time in Ireland. Michelle, Sasha and Malia Obama are making a tour of Dublin while Barack attends the G-8 Summit. American presidents have toured Ireland on a regular basis since John F. Kennedy started it all 50 years ago. Kennedy attracted massive crowds. He really was an Irishman. His grandfathers and his father made good in the New World. The country, which was pretty depressed, walked a little taller and felt a little better about itself when one of its own came home in triumph. Lo and behold, Obama has discovered that he too has Irish ancestry. Anything Kennedy can do, he can do too. After touring Ireland, Kennedy went on to Berlin to deliver his 'Ich bin ein Berliner' speech. After Ireland, Barack is off to, you guessed it, give a speech at the Brandenburg Gate.

The Obamas attracted a goodly crowd. Some grouches complained that there was a little too much fawning. But Michelle put everyone at ease. She declared the Irish were 'awesome'. The omnipresent Bono of U2 happened to pop up for lunch with the First Family at a country pub, showing that there



is not a celebrity politician he cannot sniff at 10,000 miles. Caroline Kennedy, daughter of JFK, was also in Ireland to commemorate the 50th anniversary of her father's visit. The itineraries of these two First Ladies carefully took them to different pre-arranged places, which is

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a great feat in a small country that does not leave much room for huge entourages to move. It made me think of Ireland as some kind of grand political theme park for US political aristocracy finding their (real or imagined) ancestral roots and beaming TV images to adoring fans back home.

Meanwhile, in the real Ireland, things are slowly recovering from the collapse of the banking system. After using borrowed money to finance a huge property bubble, the Irish banks looked like going down with their clients until the Europeans, underwritten by the Germans, with a real leader, gave them a financial bailout. For a few years it looked like the Irish really had invented a new way of doing business which earned them the sobriquet of 'the Celtic tiger'. They should have looked at the last group given that name, the so-called 'Asian tigers' and how they fared in the late 1990s once all that hot money fuelling asset appreciation fled the country. But they didn't. After the fall, Ireland has done it tough. Perhaps it is just now emerging, with unemployment down to 13.7 per cent from 15 per cent a year ago. The country is meeting its budget targets under the

conditions of the loan and it is possible to see an exit from the program.

The Deputy Prime Minister of Ireland assures us that Ireland will not change its 12.5 per cent company tax rate which is designed to attract (American) foreign investment into the country. This might have been a big part of the problem: tax-driven mobile capital which fuelled the boom and then fled. But as far the decision-makers are concerned, nothing is going to change on that front. One of the companies attracted by the tax rate is Google, which makes Dublin its European headquarters. It was a real experience to visit Google and to meet its self-described 'Googlers'. The average age of the employees is 26. Ties are *verboden* and jeans and sneakers are *de rigueur*. The architecture is funky. The enthusiasm of the staff is religious. Like any respectable religious movement, Google has its own Statement of Beliefs. One of its beliefs is, 'You can make money without doing evil'. I agree with that. What I wonder is whether you can make money without paying tax. That would be a truly miraculous conception.

Don't say that Australia doesn't rate a mention overseas. The weekend papers are full of the sentencing of the rapist and murderer of Jill Meagher, the Irish immigrant who worked for the ABC in Melbourne. In fact it covers pages 1, 2 and 3 of the *Irish Times*. On few occasions have I been ashamed to be an Australian. But I am asked by a polite Irishman how a man on parole can be convicted of a new crime and yet stay out of prison long enough to commit a further rape and murder. It is a fair question. To my knowledge no one in authority in the Victorian government has answered it. I take no pride in living in a state where the rights of convicted felons are so protected. I know this has shaken the ABC. It would be wonderful if it could reflect community anger and campaign for tougher penalties and the real recognition of victims' rights. That would find it an audience outside the Criminal Law Bar and the civil liberties lobby.