

TELEVISION

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Hi, I'm Feargal

First we had the Brennan brothers revamping hotels around the country in 'At Your Service'. Now Feargal Quinn, in a new TV series called 'Retail Therapy', has advice for retailers

FEARGAL QUINN, especially on his Facebook page, has an air of Charlton Heston – until he opens his mouth. He stands on the steps of his Howth home, far too cheerful to fool anyone. You get the impression that if he met any “damn dirty apes”, he'd find some way to sell them detergent.

The entrepreneur behind Superquinn lives at the end of a manicured drive, in a surprisingly modest house for someone of his wealth. But when you walk through into the kitchen and see the beautiful garden that slopes down to the Irish Sea, not a blade of grass out of place, you remember that this cheerful grandfather is also one of the most successful businessmen Ireland has ever seen.

Senator Quinn these days – “hi, I'm Feargal” – is about to appear on Irish television screens with a new series, *Feargal Quinn's Retail Therapy*. Much like *Mary, Queen of Shops* – Mary Portas's critically acclaimed series for Channel 4 – a struggling retailer is taken in hand as they attempt to turn things around in the face of competition from large multiples, cross-border shopping and the absence of credit. He's pleased with the show, which was made by Animo, the production company that also made *Celebrity Bainisteoir*.

“What I'm really interested in was: ‘Did we make a difference?’ There were three challenges in this: make a good television show that would be entertaining and of interest. The second was to make sure I was of benefit to the retailers. The third was to hopefully impress Irish retailers so that they might learn from it and give us a chance to compete.”

Quinn is relentlessly positive, and thinks it's the only way forward: “I think there's a fierce chance we can talk ourselves into a bigger recession. I would be disappointed if that happens. I would hope that those watching the programme, whether they be retailers or whomever, would say ‘hey, that's an idea. I never thought of that.’”

The big problem, he found, was how his charges in the series dealt with new customers: “What they didn't quite understand was that every person who came through the door could become a customer. Somebody who's just dropping in for a box of matches or something isn't a customer, but you could make them one, by making them feel welcome and finding out what they wanted.”

Not everyone had this problem. “Ian Boles [of Burgess in Athlone] is a traditional gents' outfitter and I'd say nobody could walk past him without getting a greeting and also a ‘gosh, would

you like a tie to go with it?’”

Quinn doesn't like negativity and has some strong views about what's currently wrong with the country. “People are saying this is the wrong time to start, to experiment or innovate. I think it's exactly the right time because there are so many changes taking place. Costs are coming down. The technology is now available. I have an iPhone – if you think what that can do, compared to what a computer would have cost 15 years ago . . . This thing can do everything. The same thing applies in retailing.”

Since he opened the first Quinn's Supermarket in Dundalk 50 years ago, Feargal Quinn never seems to have left the orbit of Irish life.

While Superquinn became part of the furniture, he was head-hunted to run what became An Post, moving from there (following a brief digression to write his business manual, *Crowning The Customer*) to the Seanad in 1993. Quinn has shown a preternatural ability to be in the right place at the right time, even as far as making one of the last big deals before the credit crunch with the sale of Superquinn in 2005.

As far as his iconic business is concerned, Quinn has moved on: “I've no involvement at all, other than having this nice title [non-executive president]. I think it's important, from the new management's point of view, that there shouldn't be any confusion. I would be unhappy if I bought a company and the previous boss was interfering – even if he supported everything I did. So I think it's important that I don't get involved.”

By the time Superquinn was in new hands, Quinn had been in the Seanad for 12 years as an independent (on the National University of Ireland panel). At first, it was a culture shock: “I found myself in Leinster House on my first day wondering quite what I was going to do. I had no experience, other than what I'd seen through An Post.”

The very first bill that came through, the Unfair Dismissals Act, showed him the way. “I started to look for the customer in each piece of legislation. There were lots of suggestions already. But I remember at the time being involved with a hotel. Someone had suggested to the manager that he ‘get a good, fine young woman behind the reception desk. I want to see something bright and cheerful’, not the older lady who was there. It was just on my mind, and it happened that the receptionist had stayed, but I put down “age” as a grounds [in the Act]. The minister accepted it.”

He doesn't see why there should be a difficulty

in going from being the boss to a voice in a crowd, even one as rarefied as the Seanad. “No, and that's why I was disappointed in George Lee. Because I didn't go in on the assumption, even in business, that you can click your fingers and issue instructions. You have to convince people and I was surprised that he went in and didn't argue his case if he disagreed with someone, whether it was in Fine Gael or outside.”

As far as Quinn is concerned, if you believe in something, you have to be prepared to fight for it. He tells me about a success – to ensure the George Mitchell Scholarship bill [a grant intended to attract US students] is open to applicants from all of Ireland, not only the Republic, something not spotted by anyone else. “The odd occasion, you have a real success. You find something that hasn't been detected, you have a bee in your bonnet and you go for it. I take that as a tiny technical one, but you do get a certain amount of kudos when you discover certain things like that.”

Through all of this, he has retained an affection and reputation for fairness from the public with which few Irish businessmen of any age can compare. No one has a bad word to say about Feargal Quinn. His long-term PA, Anne, happily commutes from Waterford just because she loves her job. His dog, a shaggy Briard (“after the cheese, you see, in France”) called Rousseau, demonstrates his love by pushing me down the slope to Quinn's office at the end of the garden, after our interview, tugging my coat to make sure I don't stray. The only time anyone wonders if he has been less than truthful is when the garden is mentioned. His wife, Denise, does the flowerers, he says, waving an arm at a garden that would impress the Chelsea Flower Show, while he grows some vegetables, indicating a much smaller patch tucked away behind the hedge. As we leave, Anne makes sure he doesn't claim credit for the whole thing.

It has been a long road but for those who can see only clouds, Feargal Quinn is here to tell you about silver linings: “When I go back and think, when we started in 1960. I was 23. The economy was very poor at the time. In the 1970s we had expanded and things were very bad at that stage as well. When you look back into the 1980s, things were tough in those times too. But if you could find something that made you different, that made it worthwhile and you could completely fly past.” It seems Quinn is still up in the air.

Feargal Quinn's Retail Therapy begins on RTÉ 1 next Tuesday at 8.30pm

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