

Paradoxes and problems of modern Irish politics:

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1. Four paradoxes of modern Irish politics

First paradox, despite a reputation and popular belief that the Irish are terribly interested in politics and political debates; and despite the belief that politics matters greatly in the lives and discussions of ordinary citizens – the Irish are believed to be well-informed politically and to be politically alert and intelligent, etc, etc – we have one of the lowest levels of popular engagement in politics in western Europe.

Among the 20 democracies in western Europe, Ireland has the fifth lowest level of turnout – after Switzerland, Portugal, France and the UK. Average turnout at parliamentary elections in Europe is still some 77%; in Ireland, it is less than 65%. This does not look like engagement or interest.

The same is true for levels of party membership: In this case, Ireland is third from bottom, averaging just 2% of the electorate being party members as against almost 6 per cent in Western Europe more generally.

In other words, by the standards of our peers, we might well be well-informed about politics, but we are certainly not engaged – at least not in conventional politics.

This is a country where there is widespread interest in politics, but in which the citizens are disengaged. We have a passive citizenry – and this is one of our major problems.

Second paradox, despite having one of the most open and least party-controlled electoral systems in the world, STV with multi-member districts, our political class – the TDs and Ministers in particular – is among the most disciplined political class in Europe. At least until very recently, and since the fall-out from the faction fighting and economic crises, TDs have always toed the party line. There have been very few rebellions against party leaderships in the Dáil (if anything, these rebellions are confined to party and parliamentary-party meetings), there has been little evidence of dissent in voting patterns in the Dáil lobbies, and there have been remarkably few party splits among the mainstream parties over the years. Here again, the clichés are not borne out in reality: the Irish, at least at the level of the political class, are not rebellious; party meetings do not have ‘the split’ as the first item on the agenda, and so on. Instead, what you have is deference, forelock touching, bowing and scraping, and a lobby fodder that does exactly as instructed by its leadership.

And this is despite the electoral system which, according to the laws of political science, should lead to the election of highly individualistic and uncontrollable representatives. In closed list electoral systems, like in the Netherlands, for example, or in single-member district systems, like in the UK or France, politicians are expected to toe the party line because otherwise they would risk being deselected by their parties or being placed low on the list and not being re-elected. In the Irish case, however, at least traditionally, there was very little the party in central office could do to sanction its TDs, since they were placed on the list by the local activists, and since they were selected from the list by the first preferences of the local voters. Indeed, as Michael Lowery and Neil Blaney have shown, voters often prefer mavericks. For this reason it is surprising that there are so few mavericks – why not 166 of them? – and that the TDs are so disciplined and passive.

In other words, as well as a passive citizenry, we have a passive political class, and this is also one of our major problems.

Third paradox, despite a general lack of policy differences between the parties, despite the weak structure of cleavages and the lack of social bases, and despite the lack of polarization or ideological conflict, we have one of the most stable party systems in the world. To be sure, government alternates these days, and there are now shifting and

promiscuous coalitions, but in other respects our party system looks like, and keeps reverting back towards, the party system of the 1930s and the 1960s. Then, as now, there were three main parties, FF, FG and Labour. Then, as now, FF was the biggest; then as now FG was second; then, as now, Labour was the Cinderella, and so on. To be sure, new parties have come onto the stage: CnaP and CnaT and National Labour in the 1950s; the Progressive Democrats and the Democratic Left in the 1980s; the Greens in the new century. But while they have come, they have (usually) also gone, and this is the great surprise.

All over Europe, across party systems that are much more sharply defined by policy and ideological differences than the Irish one, and with parties that are much more strongly rooted in society than the Irish one, with much more engaged citizens than the Irish one, new parties constantly emerge and succeed. Far right parties in Scandinavia and the Netherlands; new conservative parties in France; Berlusconi and Forza Italia in Italy; Left Socialists in Germany and Denmark; and so on. But not in Ireland, despite what is seemingly a very open and unprotected party system.

This is the third problem: a lack of really innovation and a lack of room for new ideas and new political styles. A moribund politics and a moribund political culture.

Fourth paradox, which may not be a paradox at all, but simply a misreading of the situation, despite the very open electoral system, despite the widespread emphasis on the need for candidates for election to have strong local bases, and despite the widespread prevalence of parish-pump politics, Ireland seems to be able to produce and reproduce effective ministers and heads of department. In other words, despite a political culture that encourages narrowly-oriented pork-barrel politicians, the political class, at the senior levels, seems particularly able and skilled. One relevant piece of evidence here is the obvious success enjoyed by Ireland during its periods of its presidency of the European Council. Some of the political leaders thrown up by the system in recent years may have been corrupt – witness Charlie Haughey most especially – but they were also competent. In other systems that operate like Ireland, such as the UK, for example, the basis from which to choose the top political class is much greater, and the emphasis on localism much less, and hence one would expect that it should be easy to pick a competent team

of leaders. In smaller countries like the Netherlands, for example, the Ministers are often not drawn from among the elected politicians, but instead from the civil service, from the professions, from business, and so on, and hence here too there is a great range of talents to choose from. In Ireland, on the other hand, the cabinet has to be made up by men and women from a cohort of about 85 TDs, all of whom have succeeded because they can run good parish-pump campaigns. And yet, paradoxically, we appear to get competent ministers.

Though note here the perpetual Fine Gael complaint about the difficulty of getting good people into the Dáil and into government, and note also the recent critiques about the quality of the political class by Ed Walsh, among others. And note here that I say that we ‘appear’ to get competent leaders. Given the record of the past five years, and the stories that now come out about mismanagement then and earlier, the sense of competence may have been deceptive.

So what do we have in the end?:

We have a passive citizenry, a passive political class, a moribund party system, and yet seemingly effective political leadership.

In this range of items, it is the effective political leadership which seems the strangest and most paradoxical, since the other features would not seem likely to yield this result.

So how do we explain it?

2. Governing without responsibility.

The core answer is in the evidence of a lack of control, a lack of accountability, and a lack of responsibility on the part of the Irish political class – not just now, and not just in the last few years, but for generations. In other words, Ireland is a political system that has been governed at one remove.

Ireland has been governed at one remove, and literally irresponsibly, because of the tendency to delegate decision-making beyond the political-class. This has happened in three principal ways in the postwar years.

First, and perhaps inevitably, responsibility for control over policy making and policy design was given over to the civil service. Ireland has always enjoyed the benefits of a highly skilled, talented and politically neutral civil service, one that was developed along British meritocratic lines, and that was always resistant to political patronage and jobbery – especially at senior levels. Given the lack of other career outlets and opportunities over the years, the civil service also came to house some of the best and brightest of Ireland’s emerging generations – at least until recently, when the prospering private sector began to compete to attract these talents.

Civil services are always important to policy making in any country, of course, and in this sense Ireland is not an exception. Where Ireland does stand out, however, and this is based more on my sense of the country’s development rather than on any hard and fast evidence, is in also allocating to the bureaucracy the role of principal initiator and designer of policy rather than simply the executor of policy. And this is also why the parish-pump oriented political class looked so competent – the fourth paradox noted above – they simply allowed their functions to be taken over by a very competent and very skilled bureaucracy.

Moreover, precisely because politics was not ideologically driven – the third paradox above – there was no partisan political incentive to control the bureaucracy. All governments, though of course they were mainly Fianna Fáil governments, were prepared to give the civil service a free rein. The result was that when new ideas did occasionally enter politics with some effect, it was usually a civil servant or an occasional gifted individual politician – rather than a political party as such – that was behind it. Think of Lemass, think of Whitaker.

Second, and much less obviously or legitimately, responsibility for control over policy making and policy design in a huge sector of state activity – the welfare state and social policy, and in particular health and education policy – was delegated to the Catholic

Church. The worst consequences of this policy have only recently come to light, but Catholic Church control in much of these sectors still remains unchallenged. As was recently reported, for example, the Church is still so-called ‘patron’ to 90 per cent of schools in the primary sector.

Here too, the political class, and the state more generally, has absolved itself of responsibility for governing or policy-making. This was most obviously seen in the fall-out from the Ryan report, which documented the extraordinary scale of sexual and physical abuse meted out to generations of Irish children in Catholic-run industrial schools and orphanages. All of this occurred under the tutelage of the Irish state, which ceded control of these public institutions to the Church in the first place and which turned a blind eye to the practices thereafter. Yet no single government has accepted responsibility for such a violation of rights of its citizens. There is a clear lack of accountability with regard to the Catholic Church. What is more surprising and more damaging, however, is the corresponding lack of accountability with regard to the state and the political class.

Third, and more generally, particularly in recent years, the state has effectively passed responsibility for policy-making in the financial sector to the banks and the big business lobbies. In this regard, Irish governments have always been reactive rather than proactive, seeing their role as a facilitator of the pursuit of private gain rather than as a watchdog for the collective public good.

Put these features of the Irish state together, and the result is a political world which has ceded much of its control to other organizations and groups, and which has become autonomous and self-contained, rarely connecting in any meaningful sense to a life outside itself.

Politics in these circumstances becomes an end in itself, and becomes a contest that is played for its own benefit and that of its players. It is not something that requires engagement with or the mobilisation of the citizenry at large – that happens at a much more personalistic and local level by the parish pump – and hence it encourages passivity. It is not something whose success or failure is measured in terms of policy performance or output – that is, after all, is not the responsibility of the politicians – and hence it

remains moribund. It is a system in which the individual TDs may be very close to their own supporters, but in which there is an enormous disconnect between the political class and the citizenry as a whole. This is a polity which is demobilized as well as demoralized.

Most of this problem stems from the traditional abrogation of responsibility by the political class, and from their efforts to seal politics off from the outside world. Indeed, it is striking to look back at postwar Irish history and see how few instances there have been of political leaders attempting to mobilize citizens behind an alternative politics. Labour's disappointing drive in the late 1960s offers one weak example. Garret FitzGerald's faltering 'constitutional crusade' might be another. Otherwise, when politicians have become embroiled with policy change, they have tended to remain confined within the back rooms of the Dáil and the Departments.

Remedying such a problem involves more than changing constitutional structures or electoral systems. Rather, it requires politicians to take real control of the policy-making process; it requires them to offer citizens real choices and real alternatives; and it requires them to engage those citizens in building new programmes for the future. Plotting in the corner is not a solution.