

Standards in Public Life and Accountability

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July 20, 2010

Despite frequent assertions to the contrary, it's not true that the government has absolutely no jobs strategy. The state of modern Ireland, and in particular the dramatic reversal of our economic fortunes has generated a substantial industry dedicated to answering the question: where did it all go wrong?

Much of the literature and the associated windbagging has focussed to a greater or lesser degree on identifying those who are "responsible" for the current state of the public finances and the recession in the wider economy. Fingers have been pointed at and knives sharpened for Fianna Fail, the Progressive Democrats, Bertie Ahern, Brian Cowen, politicians in general, the Department of Finance, the banks, property developers, social partnership, Lehman Brothers, the euro, and other sundry culprits.

Politically, the focus of blame has been principally directed at the governments led by Bertie Ahern. This is fair enough, and it's not inaccurate.

But if we wish to learn from our mistakes and chart our way to construct a better Republic in the future, then we need to think a little more deeply and a little more honestly about the political failures of recent years.

It's beyond doubt that we witnessed a failure in political leadership and in policy-making. But why? And why were the programmes offered by Fianna Fail's principal opponents so very similar to those offered by Bertie Ahern?

Why did our politics and our political leadership fail us so badly in recognising the dangers that had developed in economic and fiscal policy, in banking and in the property market? When outsiders recognised these dangers, why was our political system incapable of taking the difficult and unpopular steps to rectify these problems

and avert greater catastrophe?

I believe that at least part of the answer to these questions is that because this is not what voters returned politicians to parliament to do at all.

So I think to that long list of culprits for the economic bust, we need to add another: the voters and the way they vote.

Politicians are to blame for the conspicuous and ruinous failure of political leadership. But we should be frank: they share the blame with voters who have elected them on a pretty strict set of instructions:

one, that they prioritise looking after the constituency above all else;

two, that they should accede to the demands of whatever interest group is amplified by an uncritical media;

and three, that they should certainly never take difficult decisions in the short-term for long term benefit.

This is a time for difficult questions and we must ask them or we will learn nothing. Ask yourself: what would have happened to the government had it introduced a property tax in 2006? How many seats would Fine Gael have won in the 2007 election if it promised to introduce such a measure?

Why did Bertie Ahern do an about-turn just weeks before the 2007 general election and over the objections of his finance minister decide to abandon the election strategy of refusing to make big promises?

Because he feared the response of the voters to a more modest platform.

The political parties and individual TDs already know what academic research confirms. The extensive 2002 election study led by Michael Marsh and Richard Sinnott confirmed voters believed working for the local area was more important than

either performing on the national stage or sharing the views of the individual voter.

Politicians have internalised these requirements of the voters to the extent that for many, they are all that exists in politics, and the only point of political office is to prostrate oneself before the material desires of the electorate. Speaking in the Senate a few months ago, Donie Cassidy offered this succinct definition of his role in life: "In the minds of most, the definition of a good politician, be it man or woman, is someone who can bring the most to their area in terms of schools or other infrastructure."

A former cabinet minister once told me that he viewed himself rather as a sort of local chieftain of old – seeking by his efforts to bring prosperity to his people and his area.

It is not usual or illogical that voters should want their local representative to be concerned with the local area. Pork barrel politics is a fact of life in the political life of the United States, for example. What is unusual and I think unproductive is that Irish voters seem to want their elected representatives to look after the local area almost to the exclusion of all else. Even their elevation to ministerial rank is seen not as an opportunity to contribute to national leadership at the highest level, but as a way to having a larger say in the diversion of ever-larger resources to the constituency.

We may be censorious of Irish politicians who cater for and pander to these realities, but we should concede that they are acting entirely logically within the confines of the Irish political and electoral system. As Ivan Yates has repeatedly pointed out, the politician who tells his constituents that he cannot assist with their medical card application or attend their mother's funeral because he is busy attending to his duties as a legislator and national leader would soon find himself with plenty of time on his hands to attend all the funerals he wanted. He would certainly be soon considering the mortality of his own political career.

And the greatest testament to the truth of Yates's assertions is the behaviour of the politicians who do succeed in being elected: they are, almost to a man and woman, assiduous cultivators of their constituencies, constantly seeking to outdo their rivals – usually in the same party – by the comprehensiveness of their medical card procuring, their headage payment accelerating, their planning permission supporting, their civil

service pestering, their welfare application representing, their funeral attending, and their all-round all-in community service, yours for the price of a vote when the time comes round.

These are useful and, in many ways, vital skills. But they are, I submit not necessarily conducive to the possession of the skills, experience and intellectual capacities which would be useful for running the country. The central assumption of our selection process for the country leaders – that excellence at the all-round all-in community service is evidence of the skills and abilities necessary to lead the country is, to my mind, a far-fetched one, and one which I submit that our recent experience contradicts. If we elect TDs to fix pavements, and get us medical cards, then that is what they will do.

Seen in this light, Jackie Healy-Rae is not just a slightly exotic feature of our political system – in many respects, he is our political system. Healy-Rae's success since 1997 has spawned a range of imitators – with Michael Lowry's current incarnation being the most obvious one – and he will have more. The experience of 2002 suggests that a parliament in which independents' votes are bought with the spending of disproportionate amounts of taxpayers' money in their constituencies will be followed by a general election in which independent candidates, promised to bring home the bacon in a way that party candidates can't, will do especially well. Watch for the proliferation of independent candidates in the next year.

I support changing the election system and I think it could bring many benefits. But changing the election system won't work unless people change the way they vote, change the basis of their voting, unless they demand more of their political representatives – and more of themselves.

ON a broader level our political culture in the years of plenty came to be completely dominated by the idea of giving people whatever it is they want as soon as they want it. The practice of social partnership became a mechanism for buying off interest groups, in which the loudest, largest and best connected interest group, the public sector trade unions, did best. The definition of the national interest became simply the sum of the requests of the people sitting around the partnership tables of Dublin

Castle.

So we reformed our public sector by doubling its pay, only to find now that its not really that reformed at all. We remade the health service by maintaining the power of the consultants and doubling the number of nurses, to the extent that we still have fewer senior doctors than most OECD countries, pay them better, and have them assisted by twice as many nurses as the OECD average. Sure, we reformed the taxi industry to the advantage of the public and the great disadvantage of the cartel. But we didn't touch the big boys with the real power: the doctors, the senior civil servants, the Law Library, the banks.

Instead, our political culture refined itself into a mechanism to identify, mollify, pacify and the charm groups of voters, in which leadership was reduced to the ability to offend no-one and keep everyone content. The wisdom of Yes Minister rings ever true: It is the peoples' will. I am their leader; I must follow them.

Fianna Fail understood these mechanics on a micro and a macro scale: just as it greased its own way back into power with tens of billions of taxpayers money spent to generate maximum political support for itself at strategically opportune moments, so it understood that many voters judged politics by what they saw on the ground.

While researching my book Showtime: the Inside Story of Fianna Fail in Power, one of Bertie Ahern's most senior advisers told me bluntly that "Politics is about keeping enough people happy at the right time and taking the shit for the rest of the time." Another party figure told me that their instructions to TDs and candidates was simple: "If you have to go down and paint the fucking school yourself then that's what we'll do."

The other parties tried to emulate it, but Fianna Fail under Ahern were the masters at it, consumed by an almost manic desire to placate interest groups from local school action groups to big builders with hands like shovels and borrowings of a billion euros.

The practice of government itself was subordinated to the imperatives of politics. It gave us government which was fixated on elections, dominated by the short-term, unable to think strategically and blind to the danger of shoe-horning economic policy into the electoral cycle. In my book, I called it Showtime Politics. You could just as easily have called it Ahernism. Whatever you call it, it hasn't served us very well.

But Bertie Ahern didn't take power in a coup, and he didn't win three elections by hypnotising the voters. He did it by convincing the people we would give them -- and was giving them -- what they wanted. He did it by understanding that the electorate and giving to them at a national level something they had always voted for at constituency level. Until people stop voting for showtime politics, politicians won't stop giving it to them.

Brecht's caustic assertion that the people had forfeited the confidence of the government was a warning on the dangers of what happens when an elite assumes to itself the moral authority of the people. But just because the people do something, doesn't make it right, either. Just because voters say they want a particular policy, doesn't mean that political parties should compete with one another to give it to them.

I suppose I should mention accountability and standards in public life, as that is what I was originally instructed to talk about.

Whilst it's tempting to observe the Irish Times does an energetic enough job worrying about standards in public life for all the rest of us put together, I will confine myself to observing that I think that we often have a rather myopic view of these things. I think standards of ethical behaviour are important. Honesty, truth, justice, responsibility: these should be the foundations of our governance. But I also think standards of decision making and policy making should be high. Standards of administration and of the provision of services should be high. Standards of communication with the public should be high. Standards of management in the public service should be high. The standards to which the people running the country, from the highest-ranking to the most lowly, do their jobs on a day-to-day basis should be high, because too often at present it doesn't matter whether they do their jobs well or not.

As to accountability, I support the notion that politicians and everyone else should be made accountable for their actions. Though politicians, having ask their employers to rehire them every few years, tend to be more accountable than, say, bankers, or indeed, journalists.

But I think it is a very great failure of the Irish system that politicians are seen as the lapdogs of a public which frequently fails to engage seriously and in detail with serious and difficult issues.

I think we have been badly served by a politics that compels politicians to compete in promising the most, in pandering the most in telling voters that they can have whatever they want, without any consequences.

Of this type of accountability, I think we need less, not more.

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