

Newsdesk

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Is Ireland a Democratic Republic?

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Desmond Greaves Summer School

I would like to thank the Desmond Greaves School for the invitation to speak at this event. I think the question – Is Ireland a Democratic Republic - is important at this time of great uncertainty and upheaval.

For many people, at a basic level, democracy is characterised by the act of people voting to choose representatives. Some of you may not know this, but Ireland is one of the world's ten oldest democracies¹.

In Ireland, we do not tend to think of our country as one of the oldest democracies and our democratic heritage is rarely publicly celebrated. But nevertheless we are one of the innovators and founders of increased public participation in government.

This is a legacy worth remembering and defending. For example, Ireland was one of the first countries where women gained equal voting rights with men (in 1928). However, this right has not translated into the equal political representation of women and men and I will talk about this further in terms of the democratic deficit that exists in our democracy because women are not fully represented.

Today, Ireland is one of 89 electoral democracies that are categorised as free. Less than half the world's population lives in a free, democratic country.

¹ The other nine are Australia, Canada, Finland, Iceland, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States.

We have made progress on a number of fronts since the foundation of the state – we have a high level of **stated** public commitment to democratic values. We have a largely free, fair and representative electoral system. Citizens are largely well protected by the rule of law. We have a high level of press freedom – albeit biased in many respects.

We are also considered to have a strong system for protecting civil and political rights and a good record on supporting international law and human rights. Yet, Irish democracy leaves a lot to be desired in many respects.

Our performance can only be described as abysmal when it comes to the levels of representation of women in public life – we are ranked 22nd out of 27 EU members.

Our parliament is widely acknowledged to be one of the most ineffectual in Europe, with a weak system of parliamentary oversight of the government executive. And we haven't seen any major political reform in decades.

A recent expert analysis of Ireland's political system (by the late Peter Mair) demonstrates that Ireland compares very poorly as an effective democracy with other European countries. We have a citizenry which is largely disengaged and passive; and there is a lack of innovation and a lack of room for new ideas and new political styles.

The political system has also largely ceded control over policy-making and policy design to the civil service. Historically, much was delegated to the institutions of the Catholic Church in regard to social policy, social welfare, health and education.

In 1948, one of the first acts of a new Government was to send a telegram to the Pope stating the Government's desire "*to repose at the feet of Your Holiness the assurance of our filial loyalty and our devotion to your August Person, as well as our firm resolve to be guided in all our work by the teaching of Christ and to strive for the attainment of social order in Ireland based on Christian principles.*"

Time has moved on, but political parties continue to absolve themselves of responsibility for governing or policy-making. We have a polity which Mair described as "*demobilised as well as demoralised*". The culture of localism, nepotism, clientilism and gombeenism, which was well established before the 1937 constitution, remains a feature of politics at the national local level to this day.

The current Programme for Government sets out a programme of constitutional and political reforms which aim to address many of the weakness in our democracy, including the abolition of the Seanad, a constitutional convention, strengthening key Dáil committees and measures aimed at improving Oireachtas oversight of the government executive.

The Seanad is certainly in need of radical reform, but rather than abolishing it, the Seanad could be reconstructed as a more representative body that adds value to the mandate of a reformed Dáil. In general though, if the commitments in the Programme for Government are delivered on, they have the potential to strengthen our democracy.

But I believe they are insufficient to address the structural weaknesses that exist within our democracy – weaknesses that have been clearly articulated by Peter Mair and which were brought into sharp focus by the financial and economic crisis that broke in 2008.

The Irish state is democratic but it has not developed as a civic republic underpinned by the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. The challenge is to freshly articulate a new vision imbued with democratic and republican ideals that would transform Irish society into one that expands the freedom, equality and fulfilment of every person and ensures common good for all.

High levels of poverty and inequality have a direct effect on the quality of our democracy and this has been exacerbated by the current crisis, through austerity measures.

Poverty and inequality were not addressed during the course of the boom – even when the country was awash with money there was never enough to tackle poverty, hospital waiting lists or waiting lists for school psychologists.

There was an acceptable level of inequality so long as social peace was maintained. Much of this mindset was based on the myth that ‘rising tide lifts all boats’.

Hence it was accepted wisdom to cut taxes to attract international investment; to lighten up on regulation; and to privatise key areas of social infrastructure such as health and social housing.

The current crisis, which has given rise to widespread apathy, distrust, cynicism and hopelessness, is the fruit of a crisis in values at the core of a global economic system that puts profits and markets before people.

How can we say that political life is democratic when economic power is concentrated in the hands of a few, and easily converted into unconstrained political power?

Economic power shapes political power. Therefore, economic equality is a necessary condition for greater political equality. We cannot achieve a fully functioning democratic republic in the absence of greater equality – economic and political.

A direct effect of the current economic system is growing inequality.

This has led to the concentration of wealth and political power, which means relations of inequality become relations of arbitrary power and dependence. The consequence of this,

in turn, is the erosion of solidarity and mutual connection between the wealthy and powerful and the less wealthy and powerless, as well as growing alienation.

Low voter turnout is just one result. Social unrest is another – the recent riots in the UK and the popular protests across many Arab states are more extreme examples of effects of growing alienation.

In Ireland, voter turnout is lowest in poorer areas. Young people and the unemployed are two groups where low voter turnout is highly concentrated and consequently they do not have a lot of political influence.

The converse is of course the case with older people, who vote in large numbers, and we need only to cast our minds back to the medical card debacle to see how political influence works in action.

It is abundantly clear that our democratic republic has failed, and is failing, to make provision for the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of its children. All we have to do is listen to the recent reports of desperate parents of disabled children trying to access primary education for their children. These children are being turned away from our schools and parents are trying to make the most of totally inadequate education services.

Our democratic republic has also failed to safeguard the health of its people by creating a universal system of health care accessed on the basis of need rather than income. Inequalities in access to health services are causing preventable deaths and ill-health.

Inequality in access to the Irish healthcare system compounds existing inequalities in the health status of the Irish population². Successive governments have reinforced the fundamental fault-line in the Irish health system – unequal access for public patients who are usually sicker and poorer. Earlier this year, TASC published a report which sets out the causes of health inequalities in Ireland and the range of measures necessary improve the health of the population as a whole and to put public policy on the path to eliminating health inequalities.

Unequal access to education and health are just two examples of how our democratic republic is failing its citizens.

But where do we begin the process of reform?

² For example, the All Ireland Traveller Health Status Study found that life expectancy for Traveller men is 15 years less than for settled men, while the gap is 11.5 years for women.

Addressing the crisis requires a return to first principles and an assessment of the Constitution, the capacity of the State's institutions and the relationship of the State with its citizens.

The time is ripe for us to reconstitute, restructure and rethink our political and economic systems: it has become abundantly clear that these are not 'fit for purpose' and have failed to serve Irish people well – or even competently.

The future well-being of our people cannot be secured with failed systems. We need to shift the debate towards a new understanding of 'citizenship' that is not limited to a narrow legal and political definition of status.

It is not possible to talk about inclusive citizenship without considering people's access to jobs, income, housing, health, education, political and organisational power, information, media, arts and culture.

The National Economic and Social Council has set out a clear understanding of well-being which is consistent with citizenship in a democratic republic “...*people's well-being is enhanced by conditions that include financial and personal security, meaningful and rewarding work, supportive personal relationships, strong and inclusive communities, good health and a healthy and attractive environment, and values of democracy and social justice*”.

There is a clear need for a new contract between the citizens and the Irish State, involving a new Constitution and a range of reforms. We need to reform the electoral system and the Oireachtas and make it more effective, and we need other essential reforms involving the development of new and innovative means of public participation and deliberation.

An example of some fresh thinking and innovative public participation recently took place in Iceland with the selection of 1,000 citizens at random from the national registry to attend the National Conference on the Constitution. These people were asked to lead the process re-writing the Icelandic constitution.

The process included the use of new and social media including the Constitutional Council website, where new parts of the working draft are uploaded and rewritten to include public consensus. There are also Twitter and Facebook pages for comments, as well as a YouTube channel dedicated to the drafting process. In this way the Constitutional Council emphasises an open communication with the Icelandic people and has given them an opportunity to participate in the formation of a new Constitution. The re-drafted constitution will be put to the people for a referendum later in the year.

The Programme for Government includes plans for a constitutional convention – but it's not yet clear how the convention will work; who will be responsible for drafting and inputting into the process; how these people will be selected; and how ordinary people will be facilitated to participate.

Never was a radical approach to constitutional reform more needed and inspiration should be taken from the Icelandic people. There is a shared sense that we need to become more a Republic in fact rather than in theory, and that power must be more effectively vested in all the people.

Democratic republican values of equality can be translated into policy and institutions by way of policies that promote mutual protections and social justice through a minimum income; employment rights; and the basic infrastructure to provide for basic needs, such as education, housing, health, income and legal aid.

In a democratic republic, public policy must be focussed on addressing inequality. The provision of high-quality, universal and accessible public services are key to reducing inequality, but these services cannot be provided without sufficient levels of taxation.

Government policy is still wedded to the low-tax, low-spending model – a model that has exacerbated inequality and undermined the quality and functioning of our democratic republic. A different approach requires tax levels to be benchmarked against the average EU tax take, with the tax base including all forms of income and wealth combined with high compliance enforcement.

Gender equality should be the litmus test for a democratic republic. The lack of women in political life and at the highest levels of decision-making in the the public and private sectors shows us that we have a long way to go. We have a serious democratic deficit when half the population is under-represented in our democracy. Gender quotas have been shown to be effective in addressing the under-representation of women in political life and a similar approach should adopted here in Ireland.

Economic inequality fuels further inequalities. However, no group will ever get a fair share of resources unless it is fully engaged in the democratic system; but as we know, there are real limits to political participation. Social capital provides the foundations for active citizenship, which is essential for a functioning democracy and a functioning republic. Active citizenship provides people with the sense of wider social concern and the capacity to participate deliberately in self-government.

However, recent budgetary decisions have reversed earlier progress in enabling and empowering 'equality of voice' and an active civil society. Government policy, through the implementation of austerity measures, is having the effect of undermining and weakening

the quality of our democracy by reducing or cutting supports to marginalised and vulnerable groups.

It is high time for a Second Republic: a democratic republic of equals in theory and practice.

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