



A Game for all Seasons

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Pour citer cet article

O'Carroll Gerard, « *A Game for all Seasons* », *Cycnos*, vol. 10.2 (À quoi jouent les Irlandais ?), 1993, mis en ligne en juin 2008.

<http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/488>

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Lien du document <http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/cycnos/488.pdf>

Cycnos, études anglophones

revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice

ISSN 1765-3118

ISSN papier 0992-1893

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Revues électroniques de l'Université Côte d'Azur

A Game for all Seasons

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In the Europe of 1993, in order to understand the Irish at play, we need to consider not only the national scene but also the European element and the broader international context. What are the Irish playing at, or are they playing at all? How are the Irish coming to grips with the political and social reality of the last decade of the twentieth century? What is the future role for a country which has always been more at ease with its past rather than its present and whose future is often decided by world events beyond its control? I would like to consider these questions in the light of contemporary Irish political developments and the forces of change which are at work in the politico-social fabric of the 1990's.

The game therefore is politics or at least politics as we know it in Ireland. If one looks at contemporary Irish society one is immediately struck by the ease in which the old and the new coexist unthreateningly.

The country, while endorsing European unity and further integration wholeheartedly, has, at the same time, within the confines of its own borders, been most reluctant to embrace those values which Europe stands for. Ireland joined the E.E.C. in 1973 with the approval of 81% of voters and a significant majority ratified the Maastricht protocol last year. While an outsider would be forgiven for thinking that Irish society has changed little since the 1960's, the reality is however quite different and although many regret the slowness of this change, it is significant that popular opinion has largely surpassed the political processes of change. If in Europe, one of the main lessons learned in the wake of the Maastricht protocol, was the enormous gulf which exists between politicians and the people they claim to represent, in Ireland an equally large distance separates social legislation and social practice.

Where then lies the flaw in the Irish body politic? It is often said that as a people we are afraid of ideas and politicians are not immune to this national malady. Some would say they suffer from an acute dose, and others that in order to succeed in politics in Ireland one must learn not to think too much. The Irish prefer the concrete to the conceptual and whole debates may centre around a word or the different interpretations of that word. This preference for semantics can often lead to the real issue being neglected or relegated to a position of secondary importance. The influence of Anglo-American philosophy with its insistence on the study of language to the detriment of ideas seems to have breached the enclosures of Dâil Eireann.

Political debate on the real problems of contemporary Ireland is undoubtedly hampered by this lack of ease with which we as a nation treat the world of ideas. Another element must be the preponderant role which the Catholic Church has played in Irish politics since independence. With an amalgamation of a party system hostile to the world of ideas and a Church which has traditionally fought to enshrine Catholic moral values in social legislation, it is no wonder that politics "à l'irlandaise" has until very recently ignored, inadvertently or otherwise, its legitimate role as an enlightened policy maker.

It is not the aim of this article to examine the place held by the Catholic Church in Irish society and national politics. Rather, I would like to consider how the Church has influenced the game of politics and how this has resulted in a lack of real political debate to the present time. For many young people in Ireland today, it is a matter for regret that the State was ever willing to use its power to protect Catholic moral values. The situation is changing and while the Catholic Church seems to be weakening its moral authority in favour of social morality, its privileged position in the political arena is largely unacceptable in a modern pluralist democracy. One may well ask the question as to how the Church came to occupy such a central position in Irish national politics.

One of the answers, I think, may lay in the fact that at the advent of independence in 1922 our early politicians were at a distinct disadvantage having had no socially minded predecessors apart from Michael Davitt and James Connolly. That Irish Nationalism in the 19th and early 20th centuries should lack social content is no surprise given that its supporters were on the whole poorly educated and of a rural background. A work such as Zola's *Germinal* could never have come out of Ireland. It was only from the 1950's on that urban Ireland began to take shape and by 1971 the rural population had fallen below 1,5 million — or less than three quarters of what it had been in 1926.¹

The Church at the time filled the vacuum and a tradition began which has lasted to the present day, although we are now witnessing its demise. While the Church single handedly advocated poor relief in the early 19th century, it became one of the strongest critics of the Welfare State in the early 20th century. Historians have amply studied the cases of Church interference in the political process over the years but one can only surmise that such interference was possible due to the absence of a mature ideology among our political representatives.

The game of politics Irish style developed therefore in an atmosphere of repression and censorship. The Church took an unhealthy interest in the legislative process and the legislative process may be said to have perpetuated Catholic moral teaching in its laws. Thus one saw the continuation of this strange game of tactics in which it was impossible for the spectator to distinguish between the opposing sides. More often than not the game was only in jest, the answer already having been decided before the start of play. When the odd public confrontation did arise, apologies were sought and politicians' careers were sacrificed, the most famous case must surely be the hierarchy's successful opposition to Dr. Noel Brown's (minister for health) "Mother and Child" scheme in 1950.

By determining too rigidly the rules of the game, Church and State went a long way in suffocating real political debate in Ireland as can readily be seen in the number of publications censored since independence. From 1929 onwards almost every writer of worth was to suffer this fate. Indeed it became a mark of respectability to be banned, as those relegated to the sideline were to include our most famous writers. This policy of stifling any attempt at analysis, at a real questioning of the state of affairs, must be understood in the context of a system which sought at all costs to perpetuate itself. It is undoubtedly easy for us today in the relative security of a mature republic to underestimate the real fears of our early politicians for the survival of the state. We can only say that they did the political process no favour in zealously over protecting the public.²

The result can be seen today in the relative immaturity of political debate. It is only now that we find matters relating to sexuality, reproductive ethics and the rights and obligations of the parties involved, being aired and discussed. The two-party system which existed until very recently did not allow for much intellectual honesty, while the political power of the Catholic Church derived largely from its capacity to capitalize on inter-party divisions. All of this has led to a paralysis in decision making on social issues. In a society dominated by a liberal market led economy and religious conservatism it is no wonder that the content of the debate is unsatisfactory to many nowadays.

It is probably an understatement to say that the Catholic faith is linked to a traditional concept of Irish society. Some sociologists claim that it took the place generally designated to language in national identity. Whatever its place, it has marked the Irish political game since independence more than any other single organization. The game however is changing and the rules are being changed, often from outside and in such a way as to ensure a greater

¹ D. G. Pringle, "Urbanisation in Modern Ireland", *The Shaping of Ireland: The Geographical perspective*, (W. Nolan, ed.), The Mercier Press, Cork, 1986, p. 176.

² Sean O' Faolain, *The Irish*, Penguin, 1969. As well as treating the problem of censorship in the chapter "The Politicians", this book provides interesting reading on the Irish character.

participation, which should after all be the aim of any game. The removal of clause 2 in article 44 of the constitution referring to the special position of the Catholic Church in 1972, which was approved by 80% of voters, may be interpreted as a symbolic gesture to the Protestant population of Northern Ireland, but it is a gesture which has been belied by every referendum since. In 1986, 63% of those who cast a vote were against legalizing divorce just as three years earlier 66,5% of voters favoured the insertion of a pro-life amendment in the constitution, thereby copperfastening the ban on abortion already outlawed since 1861.

Just what are the changes taking place in Irish society and how, if at all is the political game coping with these changes? The traditional response of the establishment, political as well as religious has been two-pronged, either to ignore the changes in the hope that they might go away or to prevent giving constitutional and legal expression to changing attitudes about lifestyles, womens' role in society, individual freedom etc.

Irish society since the 1960's has been in turmoil, albeit a largely silent one. The struggle, the game as to determine what constitutes a self-defining feature of Irish identity has been further complicated by the internal struggles between a state essentially grounded in monopolistic moral Catholicism and a state based on the acceptance of pluralist diversity. The winds of change are blowing and the question no longer is will there be change, but rather, what will the change be and perhaps even more interestingly, what will post-change Ireland be like?

One of the remarkable features of Ireland in 1993 is its ability to have one set of rules written in legislation and yet to live by another set for sheer facility. The rift between Catholic morality as enshrined in our constitution and the reality of sexual and reproductive ethics points a finger towards a different sort of future in which the rules of the game will no longer be solely determined by an establishment Church-State coalition. A large area of silent disobedience exists as is evident in polls which show 80% of Catholics rejecting the teaching of the Church on contraception, while 90% believe that Catholic priests should not be obliged to remain celibate.³ Such an à la carte approach to religion is a foretaste of a more serious questioning of authority, an authority which has further been eroded within the last year or so by the Attorney-General versus X case and the Bishop Casey affair.

Change for the sake of change, change for the better or is it to be change for the unknown? Change has often been painful and decisive in Irish history. The abandoning of the Irish language in favour of English in the early 19th century is significant, not so much in its happening but in its speed and all-encompassing nature. The census returns of 1851 indicate a widespread denial of a knowledge of Irish and by the end of the century there were just over 500,000 native speakers in the country.⁴ A dramatic change surely when one considers the continuity which the Irish language enjoyed since medieval times. It must be remembered that since the 12th century Irish as a standardized literary medium held a unique position among European vernaculars and the proof remains in the astonishing number of works, especially in the areas of medicine and religion which were first translated into the vernacular in Irish.⁵

If a language which enjoyed such a status in European literary history could in the space of a few generations be displaced by that of the invader, how much more precarious must be the position of a Church which really only saw its position consolidated in the 19th century. The demise of the language has been the cause of endless political debate and an important source of literary inspiration. One need only think of the writings of Seamus Heaney, Brian Friel, John Montague in English and that of the many politically-minded Irish speaking poets of the 17th and 18th centuries. In fact the 17th century which was so disastrous from many points of

³ Conor Cruise O' Brien, "The Wind of Change", *The Irish Independent*, September 5, 1992.

⁴ Sean De Fréine, *The Great Silence*, The Mercier Press, Dublin, 1965. This short book is a thought-provoking study of a relationship between language and nationality.

⁵ David Green, *The Irish Language / An Ghaeilge*, Dublin, 1966. This is a short study of the evolution of the Irish language.

view for Ireland materially and politically speaking, was, from a literary perspective very important with such personalities as Céitinn, Feiritéir, Haicéid etc.

The break in tradition which accompanied the language shift in the 19th century is finding a parallel in the contemporary changes in Irish society. Just as the gap left due to the loss of the native language was never really filled, the present gap which will inevitably ensue current changes is unlikely to find a readymade solution. If the famine marked the end of the old Gaelic world of song, poetry and oral culture and saw the widespread introduction of English and the printed word, it also acted as an accelerator in the modernization process.

When France became post-Catholic in the late 18th century, the French who left the Church found a mature ideology awaiting them in the values of the Enlightenment. An ethic existed with emphasis on tolerance, freedom of expression and responsibility. It is not at all evident that such an alternative ideology exists in the case of Ireland. The English transition from a Protestant to a post-Protestant society in the late 19th century was painless when compared to the French experience but it also found in Enlightenment values the basis for a new dominant culture.⁶

So what will post-Catholic Ireland be like? The mutual forbearance and tolerance which characterized transition in former times seems to be slowly but surely receding in the Europe of the 1990's. Where is Ireland to look to? The rise of fascist parties in France, Germany and many of the traditional continental democracies would seem to rule out these as role models for any small country shedding its own burdens. The failure of Britain's policy of fiscal rectitude under Margaret Thatcher and the inability of the country to come to grips with its economic problems render it of little use to Irish aspirations. Perhaps Ireland would do best to look to the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe. Communism did after all have the effect of increasing religious fidelity in Poland just as English rule did in Ireland.

One of the problems with the new direction which Ireland is taking is that of self-analysis, the ability to stand back and look at society from a fresh perspective. We require a political and intellectual honesty in which the concept of common good is not sacrificed to any narrow definition of national identity. The function of state institutions, especially in the area of education, must reflect society's changing culture and not always and solely try to substitute for the institutions it ought to have. While it can fairly be said that the educational system has served the population well, (both at home and abroad), it has also been instrumental in maintaining a status quo in terms of national identity. The educational system has for a long time played the role of protector of establishment values in view of its unique position in the State-Church pair.

If the educational system is to play its part in the changes currently affecting Irish society it will have to broaden its base to encompass the views of minorities and especially those of the less well-off. The Welfare State in Ireland has in the past accepted a situation which is no longer tenable. In presiding over a large underclass including the poor, women, minority groups etc. the State has effectively reneged on its constitutional responsibilities. A democracy in Ghandi's terms may be judged on how well it treats its minorities and such a parameter will surely be of use in the Ireland of today where such minorities are demanding recognition and legislation.⁷

Successive governments in the 1970's overspent in an attempt at wealth creation and the same parties are now calling for fiscal rectitude in the classic panic reaction to the crisis which most developed societies are experiencing. This "crisis" psychology, which began in the 80's and is continuing in the 90's, threatens to influence strongly the direction of future social policy in

⁶ Conor Cruise O' Brien, *op. cit.*

⁷ Frederick M. Powell, *The politics of Irish Social Policy 1600-1990*, Edwin Mellen Press, New York, 1992. This book gives a realistic account of the relationship between power, resources and social equality and addresses the imbalance in Irish scholarship in this area.

Ireland. There is a danger that current swings in Irish society will be subjected to a “wait till things get better” response as a delaying tactic. The attacks on the Welfare State must be seen as the substitution of collective responsibility for acquisitive individualism. Any attempt to avoid facing up to the demands for change on the part of politicians and the legislature will only serve to further alienate an already disenchanted youth.

One of the factors favouring such simplistic interpretations in the case of Ireland is the problem of economic analysis. The economic indicators all look healthy while the social indicators tell a different story. Ireland is considered by the E.C. (according to the E.C.’s own standards) as one of the countries best prepared for European monetary union and further integration in view of the economic indicators. Politicians have to try to unravel the apparent dichotomy between these indicators and the situation as it is experienced by the population.

The national malaise may be said to consist of an unemployment rate of around 18%, an unacceptable rate of selective emigration, a large section of the population living below the poverty threshold, the continuing violence in Ulster (which has claimed more than 3,000 victims) and a feeling of helplessness among those whose views differ from the majority. In another culture and in other times the situation would be ripe for revolution, yet polls tell us that the Irish are among the happiest people in Europe. Despite the economic situation, the people contribute more per head of population to the developing countries than most of the wealthy nations. This generosity has not been matched by official state aid which despite much rhetoric has remained disappointingly low.

Once again the situation is ambiguous. While the election of a human rights campaigner, Mary Robinson, as President, may suggest we are entering a new period of constitutional freedom, the power of interested economic conservatism must not be forgotten. The recently formed coalition government of Fianna Fáil and Labour will have to prove to the population that it is capable of making radical political decisions if it wishes to remain in power for long. The Labour element holds out hope to those who see the economic future of Ireland closely linked with social reform and a recognition in legislation of minority views.

The reality is that the mores of Irish men and women have changed significantly and at a rate which has left behind the political process. These issues which are currently occupying centre stage in Irish politics are synonymous with a tremendous desire for resolution. In 1992 abortion, contraception, divorce, medical ethics and homosexuality were among the topics to be freshly addressed and which will undoubtedly continue to dominate. The newly formed Fianna Fáil-Labour coalition with Albert Reynolds as Taoiseach seems at first sight an ironic choice for the introduction of legislative reform on social issues. In the past it has traditionally been Fine Gael notably under the leadership of Garret Fitzgerald which pioneered social reform. It is perhaps a sign of the times that while elsewhere in Europe left wing or socially-minded parties are on a down, the Labour party in Ireland should have increased its share of the vote by about 10% in recent elections.

The cards are on the table for the new administration in that issues need to be resolved effectively and thoroughly. The lesson of the divisive and impracticable nature of the insertion of the pro-life clause into the Constitution must be heeded in the wake of the X case judgement. The difficulty of dealing with complex issues in the simple terms of a referendum is one that needs to be overcome. Our opposition parties must in the common interest resist opportunistic tactics which would jeopardize future developments in attempts at social reform. This danger is less of a threat today in that the greater offender in relation to this tactic (Fianna Fáil) is one of the parties in power and a Fine Gael opposition has traditionally been more responsible and today one must also take the Progressive Democrats into consideration.

The near future, will, I think, prove to be a decisive and exciting one for Ireland. The debates and concerns of today will determine the road Ireland takes going into the 21st century. With the resolution of issues of sexual morality which have drained national political energies

recently and a clearer redefining of civil and moral law, debate can be devoted to formulating a vision for the future. The choice the country will ultimately have to make is that between the confessional nature of Eamon de Valera's 1937 Constitution and all it symbolizes and a new one which will accept change and diversity, encompassing all creeds and none.

This need for change does not eliminate the psychological need for continuity which tradition provides and I think this will be particularly true in the case of Ireland. The gauntlet has been thrown down: can we as a people find a balance where others have failed? If the 19th century in Europe closed with a general *mal de siècle*, then the 20th century must surely be seeing itself out with one almighty hangover. Alienation, fear, insecurity are the catch-words of the day and the individual finds himself too often part of a society on which he depends and which however remains hostile.

If one were to bet on how Irish society is going to unfold over the next quarter of a century, there are two elements which should prove to be of significance. The first is the resolution of the present conflict between a concept of a common good and a sort of liberal individualism. This will necessitate an all-party consensus whereby the common good will not be subjected to the whims of inter-party feuding. The blueprint for such an approach already exists since the joint party statement preceding the Maastricht referendum. It is to be hoped however that unlike Maastricht a united front does not automatically preclude real debate. One of the relevant criticisms emanating from that referendum and one voiced also by pro-Maastricht voters was the poverty of real debate on the many complex issues involved.

The second relevant consideration for Ireland's social future is that of the ability to dissociate civil and moral law.⁸ It may seem strange in the light of the present situation that in Ireland from earliest times Church and State were separated even at a time such as the Reformation when on the Continent each ruler imposed his or her religion on unsuspecting subjects. The Irish dictum "Is treise tuath na tiarna" (the people are stronger than the ruler) may give us an insight into why Ireland did not follow the changes after the Reformation.

The same dictum is proving true today in that previously strong political parties are under pressure as is the Church. There is a will for change and anybody or institution standing in the way of these changes is likely to be defeated. As in former times one of the main strengths of Ireland today is the people and their respect for the person, the individual. This respect which has always existed in practice, has not always been reflected in legislation. When one considers today's changes in this light, they do not appear that striking, merely a recognition of what has always been. Call it common sense if you wish.⁹

⁸ Denis Donoghue, "Civil Divorce without delay is the next appropriate step", *The Irish Times*, August 27, 1992.

⁹ Jean Guiffan, *La Question d'Irlande*, Editions Complexe, Paris, 1989. A user-friendly guide to Irish history.