

Reawakening a once profound commitment to our community, Gary Joyce, 20 March, 2010

RENEWING THE REPUBLIC - We did not inherit Ireland's current woes from a previous generation; it's our responsibility to clean up the mess.

I AM proud to be Irish. I love that, as a people, we're known around the world for our friendliness, our appetite for fun, and our resilience. I'm proud of our great literary heritage, our vibrant living culture, and the wild beauty of our unspoilt landscapes. I marvel that over the course of a century we managed to transform ourselves from abject poverty, conflict and mass emigration to become an independent economic and political democracy, contributing on the world stage.

The "new" Ireland of recent boom years was not only affluent but confident in its own abilities, vibrant, exciting – one of the fun places of Europe. Here, for the first time, was real evidence that we could do it; that a small country could make a big difference.

But there is something else about us too that is "real" – an intangible and elemental thing – that as a people we believe we value the important things in life and protect and make time for them. This is what visitors to Ireland recognise – "the people" are what's most loved about the country.

But how can we continue to think of ourselves as good, decent, smart, successful, charming, influential people when the dark side of the Irish character has been so powerfully and painfully exposed through revelation after awful revelation in recent times?

In truth, should we be ashamed to say we're Irish? Are we ashamed that, having placed it in such an exalted position, we have allowed some men in the Catholic Church to systematically abuse our most vulnerable children, women and men, without calling those responsible to account?

Are we ashamed that our health and social services routinely fail those that they are charged to supports? Are we ashamed that the politicians we elect refuse to accept responsibility for their actions, yet we continue to reward them for doing it?

Are we ashamed that our desire for easy riches has led to the near collapse of our banking system, the bankruptcy of our State and the indebtedness of our children, while we constantly seek to scapegoat and blame others?

Are we ashamed that we allowed "social partnership" to continue long beyond its sell-by date? Are we ashamed that during the boom we shut out the dissenting voices, accusing them of being unpatriotic and talking down the country? Most importantly, after 15 years of unprecedented economic growth, how do we feel now about having so little to show for it?

If how we used the money of the boom years is an indication of what we truly value, then the desperate situation in which we find ourselves now is a wake-up call to recognise and question those values and ask ourselves how we can learn from our experience of loss, failure and denial. What do we need to do to use the learning from our mistakes as a catalyst for change, a springboard to build a new and flourishing Republic?

A good place to start might be to consider what a happy and prosperous nation might look and feel like. It might mean low unemployment, a free and fair health service, a good education system that starts at pre-school, a vibrant cultural life, proper supports for the most vulnerable, healthy and safe communities, low levels of crime, and so on . . .

We have choices about how this utopian dream might be brought about, and we can influence the decisions that are made about the future. Do we want an Ireland that's based on the principles of equality and inclusion for example, or would we prefer to build an engine for economic growth, in the hope that – in 1960s Taoiseach Seán Lemass's famous words: "a rising tide will lift all boats"?

The consideration of the questions that matter – rather than the formulation of the answers – might lead to a useful national conversation about our goals and ambitions and the trade-offs that we are willing to make to achieve them.

For example, we know from the UN Human Development Programme that Ireland, with the UK and the US, is one of the most unequal societies in the world: the income of the wealthiest 20 per cent of our population is six times greater than that of the poorest 20 per cent.

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, in their well-researched and groundbreaking book, *The Spirit Level*, (see www.equalitytrust.org for more details) suggest that large income inequalities such as those in Ireland damage the social fabric and quality of life for everyone, not just the poorest people. If this sounds like a case for the creation of a utopian socialist republic, it's useful to point out that Japan, for example, is one of the most equal societies because it has smaller differences in income in the first place (a national maximum wage, anyone?), whereas the Nordic countries have achieved high levels of income equality through the redistribution of wealth through taxation.

These are big questions. To invite public debate about questions like these requires political will – the will of the people, as well as the will of politicians and others such as the media, the arts community and business leaders.

In times of great insecurity, disappointment and anger such as we are experiencing today, the appetite for strong leadership is palpable everywhere. In the absence of anything resembling authority, competence or courage coming from the institutions of the State, government or the church, there is a void waiting to be filled. History tells us that this is both a threat and an opportunity.

Current statistics show that one in four men aged 18-25 in Ireland is unemployed, with little hope of finding work here. There are communities where children enter the education system disadvantaged by their background.

Some give up on education as an escape from poverty. Some give up on emigration, as the world closes its door against those with no qualifications. Others give up on the political system, because it brings no meaningful progress for them, or they give up on the economic system, because it seems always to take from them more than it gives. And people in these situations give up on hope.

We are at a turning point. We can leave it to others (the institutions, systems and individuals we no longer trust), or we can accept our responsibilities (along with our rights) as citizens of the Republic.

This means being willing to engage as citizens, not just as consumers. It means taking the risk of standing up and trying things that might not work, being open to criticism and cynicism, and being willing to get off the fence and make a contribution, however small or big that might turn out to be.

The most important thing is that the conversation happens – that people are invited to take part and contribute constructively to reshaping Ireland. It is not about how, when, why or who makes it happen. An online version of a national citizenship forum as called for by Fiach MacConghail (*Irish Times*, March 15th) would be a good start.

Those interested in engaging at a national or local level could form a movement to engage citizens – creating greater awareness of what Ireland is like at its best, identifying what needs to change, and how things could be changed. This kind of community engagement could happen in sectors such as business or the arts or even politics, but the real learning would come from cross-sectoral exchanges.

Could Ireland's arts and culture community initiate this kind of engagement? Could community arts centres become places for a contemporary meitheal, to borrow the Irish word for community, for connection with neighbours? What could the business or banking community do to give something back to the citizens in an exercise such as this?

The outcomes of this process could help define what kind of Ireland the citizens really want, and what trade-offs would have to be made so that we could get there.

In parallel with this kind of citizenship engagement, there needs to be a fundamental reform of the electoral system.

Our Government has lost the respect of the people, and lacks the authority required for better governance. Our public service, likewise, needs to be transformed and focused on the efficient, effective and accountable delivery of services of value to the citizens.

Not since the early days of the State has there been a need for the people to truly engage in such an important discussion. This series is about Renewing the Republic, our Republic, and it's too important to hope that the politicians will do this for us.

Ireland today is our problem. We did not inherit it from a previous generation; we allowed it to happen in our own lifetime.

It is our mess, and our responsibility to clean up.

What encourages me, however, is that I believe we want to accept this challenge. There's been a lot of talk about how materialistic we've become – how the old values have disappeared, along with the authority of the church. I wonder about that. I believe that, for all the societal changes we've seen in the past generation, there remains buried deep in the Irish psyche a profound commitment to community, and a profound suspicion of an ethos that is entirely individualistic.

I believe that this new confident generation of Irish people has retained its values of generosity and fairness, and it would rise to the challenge if given the lead. The real issue, surely, is whether our political system is capable of providing us with that lead.