



**THE IRISH ASSOCIATION**  
for cultural, economic and social relations

**Has Politics Failed?**

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(1) Has politics failed the people of the Island of Ireland?

(2) How can politics do better?

Looked at in a broad sense, the answer to the first question has to be an emphatic "no".

In the Republic, politics has delivered a greater increase in material prosperity than is happening in any other west European country. The source of current growth derives directly from long-term political decisions such as:

- business tax policies initiated in 1956 and refined as recently as early 1997
- free secondary education introduced in 1966 and free third level in 1996
- The rectification of public finances in the 1981 to 1989 period
- The currency devaluations of 1986 and 1993.
- Social partnership, especially in the form it has existed in since 1987.

If just one of those political decisions had not been taken, the Republic would not be enjoying the prosperity it is today. Not all of these decisions were politically popular at the time. Some were deeply unpopular. But they were taken, and taken by elected politicians.

In Northern Ireland, with help from the Republic, from Britain and the United States, politics is gradually forging an accommodation between Unionism and Nationalism. In their purest form, these two political ideologies are polar opposites and inherently irreconcilable.

But by patient negotiations and persistence, politics has persuaded both communities to realise that any total victory for their own ideology would be unstable, uncomfortable and unsustainable. It was this persuasion of both communities that total victory for either ideology was impossible in any acceptable sense, that cut the ground from under the campaigns of violence. If the paramilitaries still thought that total victory was a worthwhile and attainable object, they would not have stopped.



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They have stopped. They have stopped because persuasion and politics has worked.

John Hume and David Trimble are exemplars of the patient negotiation and persistence that has enabled politics to work. But there are hundreds of other politicians who, in unremembered acts of courage and hope, have brought us this far.

Nonetheless in the Republic and in Northern Ireland there is, despite all that politics has delivered, increasing evidence that people feel they can and should abstain from voting in elections.

Last year, in the Dublin South Central By-Election 72% of the electorate did not vote. In 1995, over 61% of the electorate did not vote in the North Down By-Election.

There is nothing uniquely Irish about this tendency. The public have become more cynical and uninvolved with politics in most of the mature successful western democracies.

Young people were recently asked why they did not vote in a survey conducted by the National Youth Council of Ireland. Comparatively few voters put forward lack of information as their main reason. Around 70% of the respondents said that they were either "too busy" or "could not be bothered". Given that it is hard to see anyone is so busy that they could not afford twenty minutes to vote, one must conclude that 70% of non-voters, in effect, could not be bothered to vote.

I believe that if these non-voters were really convinced ... turning against politics, as putting considerations of personal convenience ahead of civic duty. Again, if the public gets the sense that politicians themselves are putting their own personal convenience or needs ahead of their civic duties, that will influence them not to vote. Non-voting might be also interpreted in a positive way. One might argue people do not feel the need to vote, because they feel that things are going reasonably well, indeed well enough that they can leave the responsibility of deciding who forms the Government to others.

If people feel that their vote will make no difference, that all parties will pursue more or less the same policies, they will not bother going down to the polling station.

All over the world parties - even those who might describe themselves as "left" or "right" - are now competing for the centre ground with almost identical policies. "Compassionate Conservatism" and "new, modernising" Labour are examples.



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"Extremism" is the accusation that politicians most want to avoid.

So if all the big parties are telling people that their politics are moderate and centrist, is it any wonder that voters might jump to the conclusion that voting therefore makes no difference?

I say that voting at a General Election does make a big difference, but not in the sense that the fundamental economic and social direction of the country is changed by every General Election. Indeed it was the very unchangeability of economic and social direction, regardless of elections, that was a key to the Republic of Ireland's economic success over the past forty years.

The difference that a General Election result can make is at a more subtle level - at the level of values. A General Election can reaffirm old political values. Alternatively, a change of government at an election can change the value structure of politics. Values are the criteria whereby we evaluate and prioritise the choices we make, whether as private citizens or as public servants.

For example, a change of Government in the Republic would, I believe, radically change the value structure of the state. It would replace the values of the current government:

- economism - measuring everything in terms of money;
- simplistic pragmatism - the view that the end justifies the means; and
- cronyism - treating public appointments as personal gifts.

It would replace these political values with a new ethos that would put the public interest explicitly ahead of private interest. A new Government would put the public interest ahead of private interest in matters as diverse as:

- physical planning,
- educational policy, and
- political appointments.

A new government would not be perfect. Indeed the self-conscious assertion of political morality, and the much mocked pursuit of the high moral ground, also breeds smugness and intolerance. It invites accusations of hypocrisy.

But it is my view that, in the wake of the shocking revelations in the Tribunals, a reassertion of the public interest in politics is urgently needed. And I believe that that can really only be achieved in the Republic by a change of Government. That the Oireachtas, reforms of the public service, reforms of the courts, reforms of political parties, and reforms of the system of public appointments. Fine Gael is



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preparing radical proposals on all these six matters. But more than any of those, a reassertion of the public interest requires a change in the values that underlie public discussion about Irish politics.

Public service, leading by example, and accepting full personal accountability for mistakes. These are the characteristics of behaviour that should be automatically expected of all politicians. They are notably absent at the moment. No Minister in the current Government accepts any accountability for any error, no matter how grave.

That idea that one can make public service, the setting a personal example, and accountability the hallmarks of politics will, of course, be greeted with cynicism. That cynicism is prevalent in a media whose stock-in-trade is revealing hypocrisy, but without necessarily offering a positive value structure - naming and shaming, tearing down, but not sticking one's neck out and building up a new ethos.

The greatest achievements in politics have come from those who temporarily swam against the tide. It is time for Irish politicians to swim against the tide, against the tide of cynicism and indifference, against that tide which pervades public and media attitude to politics. It is time for Irish politicians to show yet again, as they have done in the past, that politics can work.

As I have said, I believe we will need a new Government to show that politics can really work. If we are to form a new Government based on openness, on transparency and on accountability, people in the Republic will need to know how to vote, to get such a Government. The election campaign itself should have as much openness, as much transparency and as much accountability as the Government it is hoping to form after the election is over.

The question will be these, when voting for a particular individual or a particular party, is a voter voting for a different Government or just for a slightly changed reconstitution of the old Government? Judging from recent past experience, that is not a merely academic question. People should have a clear answer to that simple question before they vote. Unless they have an answer to that question before the election, there will be little openness or transparency, and little possibility of accountability for what happens after the election.