

Can Republican Ideas Inform Political Practice?

INTRODUCTION

For this section of the journal, *The Republic* invited a range of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to write about some aspect of contemporary Ireland relevant to their work and areas of concern. We were particularly interested in how the NGOs would respond to the challenge of considering their concerns and practices within a framework of republican ideas. Notwithstanding the long history of these ideas, for many in Ireland today republicanism means little more than armed nationalism and violence. Reasserting the democratic core of republicanism and reinvigorating its radical political potential will form part of the educational role of this journal.

Shortcomings in democratic participation and inclusion are noted in these articles. The National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI), the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), and the Irish Traveller Movement (ITM) point to exclusions based on sex, age, and ethnicity respectively. The ITM argues that those with power always define who is entitled to participate.

That Irish society is marked by great inequalities is also accepted by the NGOs. Both the NWCI and the ITM acknowledge legislative and practical advances in this area, yet they argue that the achievement of formal rights is only a first step. Political will, proper resourcing, education, and systematic implementation will be needed if we are to move towards real equality.

The language of rights, joined to a wide-ranging equality agenda has, become the predominant discourse among the NGOs, some locating their arguments within it, while for others it is the subject of their articles.

Part of this agenda must include the recognition that cultural diversity exists in Ireland, argues the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI). Fully developed integration policies for minority groups, such as Travellers and refugees, are essential for the achievement of this goal.

There is a scepticism about the commitment to rights in the Republic, with the ICCL citing the delays in incorporating the European Convention on Human Rights into Irish law and in establishing a Human Rights Commission. Questions about the form of incorporation, the powers and remit of the Commission, and proper resourcing, will remain after they have been implemented.

It is argued by the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace (ICJP), that social and economic rights should be legally enforceable and no longer only aspirational. Rights to health and housing, say, should be considered of equal importance to civil and political rights, such as freedom of expression or voting rights.

All of the NGOs make it clear in their contributions that they aspire towards a more equal, more inclusive, more democratic Ireland. They envisage a way forward through education and the implementation of a rights and equality agenda. This approach is well established and has its merits, but can be extended in the light of the views of the other contributors in the journal, who suggest the need for greater change and transformation of existing structures. Within present economic, social, and political structures, real democratic control, self-determination, inclusion, and equality may be impossible to achieve.

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