

CULTURE IN THE REPUBLIC

(PART 2)

EDITORIAL

EASY ASSUMPTIONS about Ireland's sense of itself and Irish exceptionalism have not stood up well to recent developments. If we believed that Ireland's experience of colonisation and emigration had given us a special and benign outlook on the world, the great difficulties that have been encountered in making space for a relatively small number of immigrants have disabused us of our illusions. These illusions were based on another myth: the idea that problems in dealing with the 'other' were somehow unknown to the oppressed and colonised.

Far from Irish society finding itself in solidarity with others who find themselves in predicaments that are familiar in the story that we tell ourselves about ourselves, there has instead been a willingness to turn our backs, block off loopholes, close doors, and wish that 'they' would just go away. If this generalisation seems unjust, there is much evidence to support it.

The large majority who voted to restrict citizenship rights in the referendum; the seemingly innocuous assertions that we cannot have an open door policy; Mary Harney's casual linkage of difficulties encountered by women returning to the workforce with competition from immigrants; the seemingly unshakable and mistaken belief that immigrants are taking jobs, housing, and opportunities from Irish people and receiving preferential treatment from government bodies; official policies that include dawn raids and mass round-ups, forced expulsions, and refusal of entry to our country—these are part of the story.

They are not the whole story. In our society, we exploit immigrant workers, deny them rights and protections that our laws provide for others, pay them poorly and often below the legal minimum wage, deduct disproportionate sums for accommodation that is tied to work contracts, and grant work permits to employers not workers, thereby creating conditions for exploitation; we allow a young immigrant woman to lose her job, to lose her home, and ultimately to lose her legs; we expel the parents of Irish children from our country and are indifferent to the

consequences for either children or parents; we segregate and discriminate against immigrants through government policies of dispersal and direct provision.

The truth is that throughout our society there has been an ungenerous and narrow-minded approach to the minimal amount of adjustment that is needed to accommodate our new neighbours, friends, and fellow-citizens. But, it is not the purpose of *The Republic* to curse the dark, and the articles in this issue argue that other responses are possible. While the authors are aware of the realities and challenges, they suggest that we can move forward towards an exciting and positive future.

P. J. Mathews argues that a republican vision can accommodate different cultures and that we should think in terms of cultural possibility rather than cultural conflict—he warns against the twin parochialisms of blanket embracing or rejection of tradition. Tariq Modood challenges republicans to go beyond policies of private freedom and public assimilation to recognition of the place of different groups within our collective culture and community. In a similar fashion, Julia Kristeva ‘dreams’ of a public space that upholds the general spirit but does not erase the reciprocal ‘foreignness’ of the different groups within society—one that neither neutralises difference nor ruptures the general spirit, but respects and unifies society’s different components. Larry White insists that for the republican ‘everything and everyone in Ireland is Irish’—while respectful of tradition, the republican vision does not recognise or privilege any essentialist cultural community.

In all of these approaches, there is recognition of the choice between open and closed definitions of ourselves and of others; and recognition that how we define ourselves and others will have real consequences for the type of society we create and the lives of the people who inhabit it. The clear option is for an open approach, confident of our own place in the world, neither ashamed of our traditions nor afraid of opening them up to new influences, welcoming of newcomers, not expecting them to become like us or us like them, but that we may all change a little in our meeting and interaction. It will be to the benefit of everyone in Ireland to create this future and eradicate the shameful practices that have occurred in recent years.