

An Ireland of Inclusion

Intro

When Thomas Francis Meagher unveiled the Irish tricolour in 1848, he made a statement about inclusion in Ireland in a religious sense. Modern Ireland, however, is far more diverse than a century ago so there is real need to re-evaluate inclusivity in our society, so that the tricolour remains relevant.

Definition

But before examining this, we must clarify what we mean by 'inclusion'. In its broadest sense, inclusion is the *active* involvement of minority groups into mainstream society. The key word here is active, for without concentrated effort on the part of the state to assist with the inclusion of minorities, as well as a desire by the minority groups themselves to integrate, Irish society could become fragmented.

Historical Context

The history of inclusion from an Irish context is twofold: Irish inclusion and inclusion of Irish.

Irish Inclusion

Ireland has traditionally included by absorption. The invasion of the Vikings and Normans resulted in a diversification of Irish society with language and culture combining to create a new breed of Irish. However, the point must be made that up until independence in 1922, inclusion of minority groups in Ireland was largely enforced by the invader or colonial master and strict punishments were inflicted upon those that didn't accept this enforced integration.

The true nature of inclusivity in Ireland came about in the post-independence period. The Free State government provided for a Seanad in order to represent the interests of the largest minority in Ireland at the time: Protestants. This action was a fine example of the inclusive nature of Meagher's flag. On the other hand, women were largely excluded from business and politics (despite Countess Markievicz's election in 1918) until the 1970s. EEC membership combined with changing social values led to a more inclusive approach culminating in the election of Mary Robinson in 1991 as Ireland's President.

In more recent times, the 2004 EU expansion which led to the accession of countries such as Poland and Lithuania, Ireland became a destination of choice for thousands of nationals from these countries. This has posed greater problems as language is often the most common means of distinguishing national identity.

Diaspora

With 70 million people abroad claiming Irish ancestry, there are certainly lessons to be learnt regarding the inclusion of Irish in countries around the world. If we look at the US, Irish people were initially excluded and the “No blacks, no dogs no Irish” sign became commonplace. However, just over a century after the first wave of Irish emigrants arrived following the Famine, JFK was elected President of the US. The Irish had learned quickly that inclusion into a new society requires more effort on their part.

However, despite the deeply ingrained involvement of Irish-Americans in US society, inclusion is not without its problems. Many Irish people in America are undocumented and feel they must isolate themselves from American civil authorities for fear of deportation (despite that there is a separate organisation, the Immigration and Nationalisation Service that deals with such matters).

International Examples

There are obviously lessons that can be learnt by looking at other countries. The British multi-cultural and the French assimilation approach to integration and inclusion have been wrought with difficulties. Indeed, the recent election victories of the French far-right party Front National, goes to show how difficult inclusivity can be. As the original ‘melting pot’, the US has been more successful than most in creating an inclusive society. However, to look at any major American city is to see the limitations of inclusivity with neighbourhoods divided along mostly racial lines. The reality of inclusivity in America is that as long as you co-operate with the authorities, pay your taxes, and share the American Dream, you may segregate yourself from others.

Issues with Inclusion

Inclusion has become more complex as globalisation has led to societies becoming less homogenous. Governments have awoken to this fact by strengthening borders and immigration controls. Ireland’s location as an island behind an island has lessened the problem that other countries face but nonetheless, the increasing diversity of Irish society cannot be ignored.

One of the main problems in this country is the lack of state involvement in inclusion. Inclusivity is pushed down to the community-level. This has led to prejudices between Irish people and minorities and vice versa as there are no real structures in place to promote inclusivity. Those who don’t integrate into Irish society are sometimes considered stubborn or unappreciative.

The parochial nature of Irish politics and society is also another “problem”. Since Irish communities are often small, lack of familiarity with newcomers and minorities can lead to suspicion, and sometimes hostility.

Ireland is too small to support the ghettos of ethnicity found in American cities. The principal problem in Ireland is the presence of groups choosing to exclude themselves from Irish society as well as the absence of support system for those wishing to be included. Immigrants naturally tend to gravitate towards what they know and without a concerted effort to try and include them into Irish society, fragmentation is the result.

Conclusion

The essence of inclusivity is one of active participation in the community. Work, education, sports, and other elements play an extremely important role in Irish community development and it is here where new groups are accepted.

Nevertheless, Ireland's record of inclusion has some notable figures that came from minority groups or were born in other countries; Phil Lynott (black), Douglas Hyde (Anglican), the O'hAilpin's (Fijian-Irish), for example.

Maybe the key to understanding Ireland is in the foresight of the tricolour flag – the opportunity for those of any ethnicity, religion or culture to find the central white space as a common ground for optimistic growth and integration. A country that can put a civil war and political turmoil behind it in a Peace Process that is held as a model for other divided nations, surely can find an Irish way to integrate anyone who wants to be Irish.

Rockbrook Park School, 5th Year Student