

Time for a new Republic, one that's a community of communities

We are too diverse for one-size-fits-all government. So reempower the people

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Diverse Ireland: we are public schools and private schools; English-speaking, Irish-speaking and/or Polish-speaking communities; and many other things besides. Photograph: Dara Mac Dónaill



Fintan O'Toole rightly pointed out in his recent *Irish Times* series *The State of Us* that traditional narratives of Irish identity and nationhood are patently inadequate as descriptions of the Irish social landscape, which is culturally, morally, economically and linguistically fragmented.

This social fragmentation evidently creates a serious problem for the claim of the State to govern in the name of all: as the priorities and values of different segments of the community begin to diverge, growing numbers of citizens come to feel unrepresented by and alienated from their national rulers. In this scenario, the claim by leading citizens that they are acting in the name of the “people” is likely to be met by the response, “Which people?”

Like it or not, [Ireland](#) is churchgoing Catholics and lapsed Catholics; Protestants, Jews, Muslims and atheists; the well connected and the socially marginalised; the wealthy and the poor; urban housing developments and farming communities; gay couples and advocates of traditional marriage; home-schooling associations, public schools and private schools; English-speaking, Irish-speaking and/or Polish-speaking communities; and many other things besides.

How can our Republic be structured politically to meet the governance needs and demands of all of these diverse individuals and groups, and to avoid the political marginalisation of a substantial portion of the populace, with all of its attendant dangers for political and social stability?

Local communities deserve the right to negotiate their own solutions in problems of education, healthcare, religion, the use of public space and so forth

It is unlikely that a single, centralised national government can provide one-size-fits-all solutions capable of harmonising the needs and interests of all. Tailored and negotiated solutions, where possible delivered and designed locally, must be a large part of the solution to governance in a complex and pluralist society.

Yet this is precisely what is discouraged by one critical aspect of our national narrative (shared by other modern nations, such as Britain, the [United States](#) and France): the notion that we are a “sovereign people” that confers its collective power on a single government to rule over all in the name of all.

This rarely questioned myth conceals the awkward fact of plurality and conflict beneath an artificial veneer of civic unity. In recent decades high levels of immigration, secularisation and religious and cultural differentiation have made this cover-up even less sustainable.

Insofar as it promotes an inflexible, monistic model of governance, the myth of the sovereign people stands in the way of a reasonable political harmonisation of diverse communities and regions. The whole apparatus of government is viewed as inalienably unitary and sovereign, standing above and behind all other social realities, not unlike the absolutist kings of old. So any genuine concession of power to local communities is viewed with suspicion, as a relinquishment of national sovereignty, and genuine social diversity is feared as a threat to public order. But if we accept that the Irish nation contains a wide range of communities and associations with widely diverse priorities and objectives, then the myth of the sovereign, self-governing people can serve only as an ideological tool for legitimating arbitrary political rule, whether on the part of a fickle majority or of a remote, self-serving elite.

If this pattern continued it would set us on a steady path toward delegitimisation of the Republic, as communities and associations hurt by the “sovereign” power defected in droves from the political process or, worse still, worked to upend it entirely.

Only by relinquishing the ideology of popular sovereignty can we squarely confront the fact that Ireland is a community of communities, each of which legitimately pursues distinctive purposes of its own, and recognise the right of local communities to negotiate their own solutions in problems of education, healthcare, religion, the use of public space and so forth. This tailored response to political problems may be resisted in the name of equality, but a bottom-up approach to public policy is often far more effective and sustainable than top-down solutions designed by distant bureaucrats.

If we are serious about becoming a genuinely pluralistic Republic we need to abandon the exclusionary claims of national sovereignty and find a constitutional and political arrangement that respects the rights of associations and local communities to advance their distinctive purposes and govern their own affairs, within the bounds of public order, without requiring the special authorisation of a “sovereign” State.

We need stronger cities, towns and localities, less onerous national tax burdens, a more engaged citizenry, and greater recognition for civil-society organisations

Achieving a postsovereign constitutional settlement would require a wide range of institutional reforms, including the devolution of a host of governance powers to local authorities, more robust rights of self-organisation and self-government for voluntary associations, and the restructuring of taxes so that citizens see the bulk of their contributions benefit their local communities and associations rather than propping up the national government.

The result would be something like a federated Republic of divided and widely dispersed sovereignty, with stronger cities, towns and localities, less onerous national tax burdens, a more engaged citizenry, and greater recognition and standing for civil-society organisations throughout the country.

But the impetus for such a transformation in our social and political order would be unlikely to come from the State, which has a natural interest in protecting and expanding its monopoly over economic and political power. It would be more likely to come from the level of grassroots communities, cities, universities, churches and other associations as they come to realise that it is only in strengthening their own structures of self-government and freeing up local resources that they can effectively advance their distinctive ends and reassert some meaningful control over their destiny.

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