

Review of Ireland's Foreign Policy and External Relations: Submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade We're Coming Back (WCB)



We're Coming Back is a campaign that advocates for voting rights for Irish citizens abroad. As such, we wish firstly to commend the Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade and Éamon Gilmore on their decision to integrate public comment into their review of Ireland's foreign policy and external relations. The principles of participatory democracy and the desire to ensure an on-going democratic mandate for public policy inherent in this decision are ones held dear by the members of our campaign. As has been made clear [in numerous WCB publications in the Irish Times](#), we believe that a democratic deficit shall continue to exist in Ireland as long as Irish citizenship — and its principal expression through the right to participate and vote — is effectively denied to our overseas communities. We believe that this disenfranchisement increases the distance between Ireland and its emigrants and undermines Irish democracy. This is a view [most recently expressed](#) by Viviane Reding, Vice-President of the European Commission and Europe's Justice Commissioner; *'The right to vote is one of the fundamental political rights of citizenship. It is part of the very fabric of democracy. Depriving citizens [abroad] of their right to vote... risks making them second-class citizens.'*

Indeed, if permanent residents in Ireland apply for citizenship, and attend citizenship ceremonies in their thousands, it is primarily to obtain the fundamental right of any Irish citizen to vote in Irish elections. This is a right that is currently denied to thousands of Irish citizens abroad - including approximately four hundred thousand that have left in the context of an economic crisis. Their citizenship is devalued for the time that they are outside the country, and in a European context, this makes them regrettably distinct: Ireland is one of only three EU member states that completely disenfranchises its citizens in this manner. Denied the right to vote in national elections at home, and yet to earn the corresponding right to vote in their country of residence, Irish emigrants constitute a small group of European migrants that can elect no national representatives, anywhere in the world. They are completely denied any access to the democratic process at the national level.

However, WCB would look to recent positive trends in Ireland's relationship with its diaspora and hope that they indicate that this position — paradoxical in a nation with such a long history of emigration— will change in the coming years. Although successive austerity budgets have provoked protest, the last few years have seen more state investment in Irish communities abroad than perhaps any prior period in our country's history.

From President Mary Robinson lighting a symbolic candle in the window of the Áras in 1990, to the 2002 Taskforce Report on Ireland and the Irish Abroad, a succession of Irish governments have made increasing efforts to establish a focused 'Diaspora engagement policy'. Our current Government, although accused of encouraging — even forcing — emigration, has continued this trend towards a more progressive relationship with our citizens overseas. The Emigrant Support Programme (ESP), which funds almost 200 Irish community organisations in over 20 countries, has not suffered a significant budget cut in three years. Irish groups ranging from those providing support for the elderly abroad and the newly arrived, to GAA clubs and other cultural and heritage organisations, have received grants of over €104 million from the ESP since 2004. While the ESP's budget falls well short of recommendations made in 2002 in a State commissioned Taskforce Report on Policy Regarding Emigrants— and the commitment made on the basis of that report in the 2007 Programme for Government—it is a significant increase from the paltry £250,000 offered in 1987.

We write to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade then on the basis of such progression, in the hope that it will continue. WCB advocates for viable reform— necessarily incremental— that can greater involve the Irish abroad with Ireland. Such reform and expansion of the electorate is — necessarily — a process that requires provisions ensuring that future developments do not threaten the democratic integrity of Irish public institutions. However, over 120 countries worldwide have provided for an external vote enfranchising their migrant workers without undermining the sovereignty of their resident population. Although there are logistical costs to this process, they can be minimised through a practical approach that gradually builds on the possibility of a personal vote through our embassies, immediately available to large sections of the diaspora, and seeks to establish a secure, low-cost postal external vote for those unable to avail of the former option.

The principal benefit of this expansion would lie in securing genuine political inclusion for Irish citizens abroad, and affording them the right of participation that is borne from their citizenship. However, this greater inclusion, and the links that it would strengthen, offers significant advantages to the state, many of which have been emphasised by government over the past decades:

In the inaugural Global Irish Economic Forum of 2009, one of the listed 'main themes' to emerge was 'the importance of culture in promoting Ireland abroad and developing a unique brand for the country in new markets'. In the same year, observations made in the 2009 Strategic Review of Ireland-US Relations— commissioned by An Taoiseach Brian Cowen— recognised the importance of Irish identity to the performance of Irish and Irish-American business in America. In 2011, the major proposals arising from the second Global Irish Economic Forum included developing Ireland's cultural profile in order to distinguish our country from other, larger nations on a global stage. In 2013, the All-Ireland Creative Initiative put forward during the third Global Irish Economic Forum underlined, for a third time, the importance of our heritage and our international identity to our economic prosperity. If the global cultural profile of Ireland is essential in generating investment and supporting the Irish economy, it is underpinned by, and operates through, the links that are created and proliferated by our overseas communities.

The centrality of the Global Irish Network and the Global Irish Economic Forums in the Government's diaspora engagement policy to date highlight an obvious awareness of the economic advantages to be gained from such links. Largely, however, the Irish diaspora is undervalued and underutilised. The aforementioned 2009 Strategic Review of Ireland-US Relations remarked that 'our single greatest asset in the US is our diaspora. Irish America has helped Ireland's development and it remains a resource of incomparable benefit.' This statement is indicative at once of both the potential and the

mishandling of the Irish diaspora; Irish citizens abroad are a population, not just a resource. An outlook emphasizing their economic value but overlooking their citizenship and the rights that come with it may partially explain their disenfranchisement but it cannot justify its continuation.

In the Public Consultation Document that preceded this submission, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade outlined its desire for policy that integrates Ireland to a greater extent within existing European and UN legislative frames. The extension of the democratic franchise to our overseas community must be viewed within this context. The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, adopted in December 1990 by the United Nations General Assembly, states that ‘Migrant workers and members of their families shall have the right to participate in public affairs of their State of origin,’ including the right to vote to be elected at elections of that State. On the 29th of January 2014, the European Commission, not for the first time, called on EU member states (explicitly listing Ireland) to:

- Enable their nationals who make use of their right to free movement in the EU to retain their right to vote in national elections if they demonstrate a continuing interest in the political life of their country, including by applying to remain on the electoral roll;
- When allowing nationals resident in another Member State to apply to keep their vote, ensure that they can do so electronically;
- Inform citizens in a timely and appropriate way about the conditions and practical arrangements for retaining their right to vote in national elections.

As per this report, ‘the main justification for disenfranchisement rules – that citizens living abroad no longer have sufficient links with their home country – seems outdated in today’s interconnected world’. The voting simulations run by Ballotbox.ie, in which Irish citizens abroad effectively voted along identical lines to those at home in simulated national and Presidential elections, seem to argue the same case. Irish citizens overseas exist now in a different context to the emigrants of Irish history. The widespread proliferation of online media and news sources, as well as programs such as Skype, provide a clear window into events back home. It has become increasingly easy for citizens outside of the State to keep up to date with current affairs – and their family and friends – within it.

In an almost uniquely Irish setting, a common objection to emigrant enfranchisement is the potential size of the overseas population. Again, however, it is important to remember that Ireland would be legislating for reform in a modern context. There are many precedents and models – employing various controls, such as time limits or a set number of reserved seats – on which we might base laws allowing for the political representation of Irish emigrants at home. For example, Croatia has a large diaspora proportionately equivalent to our own (400,000 emigrants for 4.267 million resident nationals). They have however managed to incorporate their overseas population in the public affairs of their nation through the creation of an overseas constituency with a maximum number of seats and a formula taking into account the number of votes cast abroad and the average number of votes needed to obtain a seat-in-country. Ireland could also look to Australia, New Zealand and Canada— with which we are linked through our overseas communities— regarding the feasible extension of the democratic franchise. Across the international community of modern democratic

nations, workable templates exist through which citizens overseas can be afforded realistic – but meaningful – political representation, whilst respecting the sovereignty of resident citizens.

The difficulties, then, in reversing disenfranchisement tend to be exaggerated and the benefits tend to be underestimated. There is a lot to be gained in a re-evaluating our current policies. Emigration – long a part of our history— is increasingly featured in newspapers and political debates, and represents a current solution (and potential future) for huge numbers of Ireland’s youth. The effect of a 25% drop in the amount of people in their twenties in Ireland since 2009, and the impact that this has had on Irish families, has not gone unnoticed. However, the narrative of forced emigration is only partially accurate. According to University College Cork’s émigré study, nearly 50% of recent emigrants left full time employment when they left home, and a 2012 Irish Times survey found that 80% of emigrants are happier in their new situation than they had been previously. A continued focus on the more tragic elements of migration is not necessarily always justified by these data, and obscures the fact that migration often represents an alternative to a future lacking in options and opportunity. Extending the franchise to our migrant population would enable our citizens overseas to draw on their experience abroad to enrich and enliven their home state.

Migration is a fact of modern life. The number of migrant workers globally has more than trebled since the 1960s. The consolidation of legislation enabling free movement of people and the relative convenience and low cost of contemporary means of travel continue to factor in the increase of this number. Even in 2006, at the height of immigration into Ireland, 15,300 Irish citizens left the country. WCB’s proposal that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade involve the Irish communities overseas in Ireland to a greater extent politically is based on the belief that reforming Irish democracy will enable it to more adequately deal with modern migration, enrich the state economically and socially, and better provide for the rights of Irish citizens. It would represent a considered investment in the future and an overdue delivery on pre-election pledges of the past. Fine Gael famously heralded a ‘democratic revolution’ in 2011, but this has yet to be realised. Involving Irish citizens abroad in the political life of their nation would constitute a significant step towards delivering on this promise.

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