

Review of Ireland’s Diaspora Engagement Policies: Submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade We’re Coming Back (WCB)

As members of a campaign that advocates for voting rights for Irish citizens abroad, and as proud citizens of a democracy that stands before a decade of commemorations, We’re Coming Back wishes firstly to commend the Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade & Éamon Gilmore on extending an invitation to emigrants across the world to participate in a public consultation process reviewing Government policy. 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.

Initial efforts to afford Irish emigrants the right to vote began with a similar invitation - in London in November 1988, when Liam Ó Cuinneagáin of *Oideas Gael* and Senator Joe O’Toole were invited to Galway’s Irish Language Center *Áras na nGael* to speak at a conference on ‘Alternatives to Irish Emigration’. From this conference came *Glór an Deoraí* (Irish Emigrants’ Voice), the first in a long line of groups advocating for a political system in Ireland that acknowledged its citizens abroad.

Since then, the trend has been one of a slow but progressive shift in state policy, from indifference towards embrace. From President Mary Robinson lighting a symbolic candle in the window of *Áras an Uachtaráin* in 1990, to the establishment of a dedicated Irish Abroad Unit within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 2004, successive Irish Governments have worked to include the Irish abroad in the future of the Irish nation over the past twenty-five years.

In the context of recent economic crisis especially (and the accompanying upsurge in emigration), the extent of that involvement has further increased. In the initial years following the crash, Ireland’s relationship with its citizens abroad was harnessed by the current Government to build up the state’s export market and to develop Ireland’s international profile in an effort to attract foreign investment. The Global Irish Economic Fora, for example, were inaugurated in 2009— in the words of former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Michael Martin— “to shape a more strategic relationship, which will bring benefits both to Ireland and to our global community and which has a more developed economic focus”. State-backed tourism initiatives, such as the Gathering in 2013, were promoted countrywide to encourage emigrants to holiday at home, and certificates of Irishness were sent out to build interest in Ireland amongst those of Irish heritage.

Since 2008, emigration has once again become a recurring feature of Irish life — separating families, depopulating rural areas, and featuring prominently in national media and political debates. Upwards of 400,000 people have left the country in the intervening period. Between 2007 and 2012, the number of 15-24 year olds in Ireland decreased by almost 10%. In this context, though often criticised as cynical or even money-grabbing, Ireland’s recent turn towards its Diaspora demonstrates an awareness of the changing dynamic of Irish society that has developed in the wake of economic crisis. We write, then, on the basis of this awareness, in the hope that it will generate the space needed for genuine consideration of long-overdue reform. This review, dedicated as it is to engaging with the Diaspora, is cause for initial optimism in itself.

We're Coming Back sees its own place in this relatively short history as an open group representing (in particular, but not limited to) those recent emigrants, and their right to political representation within Ireland as citizens of a democratic state.

Already, within law, Irish citizens abroad that intend to return to Ireland within eighteen months are considered as continuing residents of the state under Section 5 (4) of the Electoral Act 1963. Broadening the scope of Section 5 (4) of the Electoral Act 1963 with an appropriately drafted statute could extend the democratic franchise to Irish emigrants who intend to return, in recognition of their status as continuing stakeholders within the state, thereby allowing them to retain their vote conditionally— this being highly similar to the manner in which Australia legislates to enable its citizens overseas to vote for a period of six years after leaving the country.

With such a simple, small change the current model, which indiscriminately disenfranchises Irish emigrants— with no room for manoeuvre and no regard for how long they might be gone, or the circumstances in which they left – would cease.

Today, it is heartening to see the rate of emigration falling back home, and economic indicators beginning to slowly improve. For those who have left, however, recognising their citizenship and their contribution to this process would represent a progressive response to a period of acutely heightened emigration that is (hopefully) subsiding. The hundreds of thousands who have left, who made the decision to search for work and opportunity abroad, relieved pressure on the state and on our social welfare system and prevented unemployment levels from rising to even more disastrous levels. Affording those among them who mean to continue as stakeholders and contributors to Irish society the right to vote would develop relations with the Irish abroad in a modern, meaningful way, while establishing clear and fair criteria by which voting rights might be retained for future generations that may depart.

Through such legislative provisions, the electorate could be expanded abroad without presenting any credible threat to the democratic integrity of Ireland's public institutions. Such reform would see the development of a more modern attitude to migration, citizenship, and the intersection of the two, and allow Ireland to take its place alongside over 120 countries worldwide that have secured voting rights for their migrant workers without undermining the sovereignty of their resident population. We have historically excluded our citizens abroad largely because of the significant size of our Diaspora—however, this ignores the numerous precedents set by other states by which similar issues are easily reconciled. Many models, employing various controls, such as set time limits or a limited number of reserved seats, are utilised worldwide to allow for the political representation of migrant citizens whilst respecting the sovereignty of the resident population. Ireland should look to these examples as we look once more to our Diaspora.

Over the past twenty-five years, prominent figures from across the political spectrum have regularly highlighted the possibility for such a change. From Labour Deputy Gerry O'Sullivan who, in 1991, proposed the first, narrowly-defeated bill legislating for emigrant voting rights for fifteen years after becoming non-resident, to Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform Brendan Howlin, former Taoiseach John Bruton, and current President Michael D Higgins, the list of politicians who have historically supported, under similar conditions, extending various forms of an external vote to the Irish abroad is a surprisingly long one. The case has been made at home for a range of motions that mirror— in their diversity and innovation— the breadth of models used across the rest of the world.

Today, as the Irish Government reviews its policies in relation to the Diaspora, we ask that they review these past initiatives also. After all, it was not long ago that both Fine Gael and Labour spoke so strongly in favour of extending the democratic franchise to Irish citizens abroad. On the 13th of March 1991, when the time came to vote on a bill brought before Dáil Éireann by the Labour Party that would have allowed Irish emigrants to retain full voting rights for a period of fifteen years after their departure, then Deputies Enda Kenny, Éamon Gilmore, Brendan Howlin, Ruairí Quinn, Alan Shatter and Pat Rabbitte (amongst many others) voted in favour: members of a group of 62 supporting the principle, narrowly defeated by 66 votes against.

Today, we would remind the current Taoiseach of his [speech before Dáil Éireann](#) on that day, his words remarkably prescient given the exodus of recent years:

“If young people are central to the democratic system it is imperative that the Government of the day see to it that they become part of the system, and that they will be able to vote here even when they are forced to leave, or leave for experience, or better jobs, or because of lack of economic progress at home. They should have the right inherent in the principle of this Labour Party Bill. There should be some system where such people can exercise the democratic right that they are supposed to have under a Constitution which is supposed to cherish all the children of the nation equally. Are they the children of the nation only when they are at home?”

Twenty-three years have since passed, and An Taoiseach Enda Kenny now stands at the head of a Government with the potential to act on those words. In 2011, that Government was elected in the hope of a new Ireland— one that would count and take into account her people, and one in which promises were kept. Such prior commitments are important when we reflect on the promise of a ‘democratic revolution’, and the place afforded to our citizens, both home and abroad, within it.

In our own past and across the international community of modern democratic nations, workable templates exist through which citizens overseas can be afforded realistic – but meaningful – political representation back home. At We’re Coming Back, we believe that a review of Diaspora engagement policies owes it to all those Irish citizens who have emigrated to take those past templates into account, particularly the potential to extend the franchise by widening the scope of Section 5 (4) of the Electoral Act 1963. Recent celebrations of Anglo-Irish relations have reminded us of the rich, living connection that continues to exist between Ireland and our communities abroad, and presented us with a real opportunity to properly recognise them as citizens: having sought to ‘harness the Diaspora’, we would be remiss not to take it.



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