

Democracy, Disillusion and The Political Process

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Global Research, March 07, 2013

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A new nationwide opinion poll in Ireland has shown that people are becoming more and more disillusioned with the political process leading one to wonder if democracy (people rule) has simply become demopsefia (people vote). This type of disillusionment is becoming widespread across Europe in general. While no one is naive enough to believe all the promises of politicians, in recent years the desires of the electorate seem to be ever more blatantly subsumed to the financial interests/problems of recent governments.

While in the past clientelism and patronage produced some semblance of benefit to the voters, the deepening financial crisis and unemployment is breaking down the old ways of thinking and behaving. Voters are becoming just that, voters. And as such, are starting to wonder what is the point of voting at all? Thus we have an increase in the third main aspect of the current crisis, emigration. According to [Aideen Sheehan](#) emigration is 'at famine levels' as 200 leave country every day: 'Some 87,000 people emigrated from Ireland in the year to April 2012, three times as many as the annual exodus during the boom years.'

Another [source](#) states that: 'More than half of those who left the country in the 12 months up to April [2012] were Irish and almost 36,000 were under the age of 25, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) said.'

We have come a long way from the desires of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, whereby, as the former President of Ireland Mary Robinson [writes](#):

'The motto of The Irish Citizen newspaper, published by the Irish Women's Franchise League from 1912 to 1920, encapsulates not only the ideals of the campaign for female suffrage in Ireland but the longing of women the world over to be equal and active citizens in their societies: "For men and women equally the rights of citizenship; from men and women equally the duties of citizenship."'

The sleight-of-hand conversion of the citizen into consumer only works insofar as the consumer has the wherewithal to consume. Another recent [survey](#) revealed that 'Irish consumer sentiment plunged five percentage points in February [2013] as the effects of January sales faded and a deal to restructure a €30 billion government debt failed to boost confidence.'

Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that consumer confidence will improve with the range of new taxes being prepared by the government at the moment. The downward spiral caused by taking more and more money out of the economy to pay government debts is reflected in the comment by KBC Bank economist Austin Hughes who [remarked](#) that: 'The Irish consumer is seeing an improvement in 'macro' conditions across the economy but their personal finances remain under pressure.'

Yet while consumers become disillusioned and young people vote with their feet, the belief

that the democratic system is not simply about voting on who will win/lose their well-paid jobs in the government is alive and well in the growing immigrant community in Ireland. At the Irish Citizenship Ceremony held in Dublin last year almost 4,000 people from 115 countries became Ireland's newest citizens. According to [Charlie Taylor](#) in the Irish Times:

'Attorney General Máire Whelan SC and retired justice Bryan McMahon presided over four ceremonies at which 3,800 individuals were sworn as Irish citizens, having made a declaration of loyalty to the nation and fidelity to the State as well as undertaking to faithfully observe the laws of the State and respect its democratic values.'

The enthusiasm of Ireland's newest citizens was evident. 'I am very excited today because I have been here for so long working hard to get my citizenship' said [Maria Elizabeth Mallo](#) (50) from the Philippines who has lived in Roscommon for the past 10 years.

Is it possible that this enthusiasm for citizenship ignited by a newly globalised population will push the superficial concept of consumer (not to mention its manipulability) over the edge and bring about a return to a national ideology of rights and duties of citizenship? We are not beholden to the state for whatever we have or consume - we pay taxes and uphold the laws that keep the state in existence. To narrow the concept of citizen to the concept of consumer leaves out elites in society who have absolutely no loyalty to any state yet gain all the benefits. By re-defining ourselves as citizens again and re-imagining what kind of society we want to live in, surely we can put our votes to better use?

Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin is a prominent Irish artist who has exhibited widely around Ireland. His work consists of paintings based on cityscapes of Dublin, Irish history and geopolitical themes (<http://gaelart.net/>). His blog of critical writing based on cinema, art and politics along with research on a database of Realist and Social Realist art from around the world can be viewed country by country at <http://gaelart.blogspot.ie/>.

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