

Chapter 12

State and civil society in Ireland: Conclusions and prospects

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The end of Ireland's economic boom provides an opportunity critically to assess the nature of the state-civil society relationship as it has evolved, and to offer perspectives on how it might change in the immediate future. This is the purpose of this chapter. It begins by summarising what the book has told us about the nature of the relationship between state and civil society in Ireland as we put the Celtic Tiger period behind us. The chapter then illustrates some examples of the consequences of the type of state-civil society relationship that became dominant in Ireland over the past two decades, identifying some worrying absences. The following section theorises the symbiotic relationship between state and civil society and how both have mutually constituted themselves with outcomes that are ever more evident throughout Irish society. The chapter finishes by mapping some alternatives about how the relationship could be transformed in a way that would be more beneficial for civil society and for Irish society more widely.

The state-civil society relationship today

Four themes emerge from the chapters of this book about how the state and civil society have interacted over the past two decades. These emerge from various authors but are consistent across the range of contributors to the book, thus reinforcing their weight. Each is treated in turn, drawing on previous chapters by way of illustration.

i) A controlling relationship:

In Chapter 3, Brian Harvey traces the evolution of the state-civil society relationship over the decades, drawing attention to the 'many evolutions, changes of course, u-turns, inconsistencies and adjustments' that have characterised it. He refers to the promise of the first formal policy document on the role of civil society which finally appeared in 2000, endorsing the right of civil society organisations to have independence and freedom of action, and to be able to speak out on issues that concerned them. However, soon afterwards it became evident that policy was moving in the opposite direction, as a services paradigm began to dominate the role that the state envisaged for civil society. As Harvey puts it: 'Increasingly, the relationship between the state and civil society came to be defined around services' while, at the same time, organisations that received state funding – including those working on overseas development Travellers, and childcare – were told to cease criticising government if they wanted to continue receiving funding. Harvey offers evidence of an ever more restrictive and controlling regime being imposed on charitable organisations summed up in the sinister phrase 'non-adversarial partnerships' used by the National Economic and Social Council in 2005. As he puts it, 'that the Irish state fears a civil society that might dare try, in its words, to "persuade" speaks volumes of its multiple insecurities.'

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In Chapter 4, Mary Murphy comments that the Irish state has retained and even increased its power over civil society and is 'restructuring local civil society in its own interests' rendering community work and local development work 'vulnerable to the manipulations of the state'. She concludes that the Irish state's strategy 'to co-opt, control, disempower and attempt to effectively cognitively lock Irish civil society has been largely successful'. Martin Geoghegan and Fred Powell in Chapter 9 place this strategy in the context of 'the hegemonic discourse of social partnership' over the past two decades to which alternative approaches such as local development initiatives and civil society community action had to accommodate themselves. These authors therefore present the Irish state's approach as just one approach and see local development initiatives and community action as alternatives to this.

ii) *Ever more disciplinary funding regimes:*

It is in the terrain of funding that this state control is most clearly exercised. Murphy identifies a politicisation of the funding regime for community and voluntary sector organisations and a discernible shift in funding to organisations that provide services. Furthermore, Harvey shows how the state's desire to control the community and voluntary sector was first demonstrated in funding cutbacks and in unilateral changes to well-established funding arrangements, and he comments that the sector was 'taken aback by the manner and vindictiveness' of these actions. The growth in state funding for the community and voluntary sector over the past two decades and the ever greater dependence of the sector on such funding comes therefore at great cost to the sector and to the quality of Irish democracy. Also, it is becoming more and more evident that the state is using funding to impose its agenda in a very disciplinary way, a practice that makes a mockery of the ubiquitous discourse of 'partnership'. Little partnership has been evident in the state's decisions on funding for the sector over recent years.

iii) *State wants service provision model:*

For various contributors to this book, the thrust of the Irish state's policy towards civil society is to move it from concerns with redistributive justice and social change towards the provision of services, usually in some kind of partnership with the state. Geoghegan and Powell describe the process as the 'reinvention of community development as consumerist welfare provision rather than developmental active citizenship'. They conclude that the managerialist logic of social service provision orients active citizenship away from political activism and points it towards 'more socially conservative conceptions of active citizenship that emphasise "self-reliance"', thereby reasserting the pre-eminence of the state in the social partnership policy paradigm.

For the practitioners of community development, this situation raises particular challenges. Catherine Murray and Paul Rogers write in Chapter 11 that funding is increasingly for service interventions and not for capacity building. They add that this approach to funding is 'myopic in that it drip feeds funding into communities and ensures a dependency culture when we should be looking toward independence and long-term sustainability'. Furthermore they say they are 'faced with the realisation that despite a significant commitment to social inclusion, there is little evidence that this commitment has become part of the dominant culture and ethos of many statutory

bodies and other organisations working from a social inclusion remit', something which finds expression in the 'restrictive criteria of key programmes'.

In his examination of a far wider set of social movements in Chapter 8, Mark Garavan interestingly identifies a fundamental range of issues to which the Irish state is deaf, that it does not want to hear from civil society. Examining controversies over incinerators such as at Poolbeg, electricity pylons such as those proposed for Meath, and the Corrib gas pipeline in Mayo, he writes: 'It seems that lots of community actors seem to be very annoyed about lots of specific issues and well capable of expressing their disgruntlement.' Yet, while these actors appear to have very little difficulty in articulating their position, Garavan argues that instead of being able to generate a deep debate on fundamental issues such as the meaning of development, the value of community or the purpose and implications of our economic models, 'they are instead forced onto far narrower discursive ground'. This he illustrates through examining the discourse between the various stakeholders in the Corrib gas dispute in north Mayo since 2000, concluding that in this conflict between community actors on the one side and the state and large multi-national corporations on the other, 'it becomes clear that critical issues animating the conflict are often not heard at all'.

The state's evident desire to restrict civil society actions to service provision is therefore doing a great disservice to Irish society as it drives into oppositional channels the rich contribution that civil society has to make to the fundamental questions facing Irish society, questions of justice, equality and models of development. Again this contradicts the rhetoric of partnership and shows a state that is unable to be self-critical and to engage in learning. It is a most ominous portent for the future as, due to the economic downturn, the state loses its ability to stifle dissent through throwing money at it. May it seek more repressive ways of doing this?

iv) *Blinkered and obfuscating ideology:*

In Chapter 6, Michael Cronin examines the meanings that lie behind the use of the concept of 'active citizenship' by the Irish state. Examining the deliberations of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship, he finds that what the term hides is any understanding of the unequal distribution of power in Irish society so that what is presented is a highly individualised and idealised picture of the power individuals have. Murphy makes a similar point when she writes of the failure of the state's discourse on social capital to address power inequalities between communities. As Cronin puts it: 'Such individualization of problems has the dual advantage of concealing the real power differentials between different players in society ("you have just as much responsibility as a Tony O'Reilly") and making politics a continuation of market forces where what matters most is consumer preference and the sustainability of Brand Ireland.' As a result, what the Taskforce presents are 'sets of symptoms with no identifiable causes' so that, by refusing to provide a critical context for the understanding of the operations of the market economy, it deals with problems it can neither understand nor resolve. 'The result is that the active citizen is left to believe in a familiar credo of Faith (in the current politico-economic setup) and Good Works (volunteering).' This illustrates well the blinkered and obfuscating nature of the benign rhetoric with which the Irish state has cloaked itself over the era of the Celtic Tiger – appearing to be friendly to citizens and their needs but neglecting entirely the

situation of growing inequality in power and resources created by its policies, and actively discouraging any questioning of this situation by its citizens.

Geoghegan and Powell elaborate on the implications of this ideology for the provision of services. Examining the treatment in the Taskforce report of three key issues – equality, political engagement, and governance – they identify a communitarian and neo-liberal view equating citizenship ‘with a voluntaristic, depoliticised notion of civil society based upon promoting social capital’. They add that the ‘relationship between the state and civil society in terms of governance is underpinned by a neo-liberal managerialist view of social service provision’. They identify the key state concern that drives this ideological configuration as follows:

What is emerging is a form of welfare where the ideology of neo-liberal and communitarian civil society, of *community*, eclipses the idea of a politically active civil society, binding social actors together in the name of the national project of ‘partnership’ i.e. of making Ireland attractive for international investment (emphasis in original).

This identifies the Irish state’s real priorities and the reason why it limits the activities in which it wants to allow civil society to engage.

In Chapter 5, John Baker maps out a more challenging agenda for Irish society, focusing on the issue of equality. He identifies that ‘the kinds of equality that have become central to Irish discourse and legislation are primarily the weakest forms of liberal egalitarianism – such as anti-discrimination legislation and means-tested support for basic needs – as distinct from stronger forms of liberal egalitarianism and radical ideals of equality of condition.’ From another angle, this again shows the limits of the Irish state’s view and, by making such limits transparent, helps to show just how restricted it is. As he writes: ‘Like many other political concepts, there are more and less challenging conceptions of equality, and it is generally the less challenging forms that have become familiar. However, the fact that equality is back on the political agenda provides an opportunity to press for more ambitious goals.’ This clearly opens up grounds for a more contestatory form of active citizenship promoting much more ambitious goals and putting pressure on the state to achieve them.

Consequences and absences

Some civil society organisations actively seek a new regulatory relationship with the state. Other civil society organisations struggle to maintain a wider and more political understanding of their role but are thwarted from doing so by the very regulatory framework that they seek to resist. There have been many practical manifestations of the loss of dynamism in civil society over recent years. The following discussion outlines a number of key ‘absences’ in the Irish state/society dynamic that, when combined, illustrate the scale of the task facing Irish civil society organisations that wish to reconstitute their relationship with the state.

a) Absence of political dynamic

Shriver (2007:64) argues that civil society is the natural counter weight to government in the affairs of the state and often the space from which spontaneous movements

develop to oppose government policies. A review of the experience of the civil society movements in both Eastern Europe and Latin America illustrates that it is not unrealistic to see civil society movements give birth to new political movements. However, so far this has not happened in Ireland. There is recent Irish evidence of some civil society groups seeking to develop more overtly political strategies across environmental, service charge, regeneration and anti-development issues in local authority areas. This grassroots 'ground up' organising through umbrella groups like 'People before Profit' represents a new space and a new strategy for Irish civil society and has already given rise to some new political dialogue. Whether it can be sustained over a long time period, and go on to develop broader political coalitions with anti-poverty and equality sectors and other political actors, remains to be seen.

b) Absence of national reform campaigns

It was argued earlier that the present relationship between state and society can be understood as the outcome of a long historical trajectory where civil society mirrored a state that is predominately populist in culture and clientelistic in forms of acting. Hardiman (1998:122) argues that if we want to understand the relative lack of progress in redressing inequalities we need a 'closer analysis of the patterns of interest representation in the form of party policies and interest group formation'. Taking as an example that part of civil society concerned with social welfare issues, it is instructive to observe how it has organised itself not as a unified political force but mirroring the state's social welfare categories – farmers, unemployed, lone parents, and those with a disability. Like the contingent nature of the social security system, the agenda of each civil society group tends to be one-dimensional. While some larger national organisations maintain a coherent institutional engagement with the state, most social welfare activity is focused on state-controlled processes, chief among them the annual pre- and post-budget 'listening' forums where up to 40 diverse and often small groups submit budget submissions. In this process it is commonly acknowledged that discourse is 'voice without influence' (Lister, 2004) that 'has not proved enough to change policy priorities' (Hardiman, 1998: 142). This sub-sector of civil society, because its organic development has mirrored the state's own structures, has not the power of a well organised vested interest to influence policy. Similar observations can be made about the fragmented nature of lobbies in the health, disability, education and housing sectors¹. This general absence of a national umbrella group dedicated to cross-sectoral campaigning on specific social policy issues is noticeable when compared to civil society practices in other countries.

c) Absence of civil society as a positive voice in Lisbon referendum

The experience of the 2008 Lisbon referendum campaign is instructive about the health of civil society and shows how a potentially beneficial and interdependent relationship between state and society can be diluted into a weak and dependant one. At least some of the discourse in the Lisbon referendum points to the presence of an active and independent civil society that was strong enough to provide an effective counter discourse to the established and mainstream body politic. There is also evidence, as suggested by new social movement theory, of a relatively healthy participatory democracy with the ecological movements and anti-military movements offering new and alternative ways of organising.

¹ In the British context, both Whitley and Winyard (1987) and Lister (1988) observed the ease with which governments consciously play groups off against each other and the importance of members of the British anti-poverty sector acting as a single unified lobby.

However, on closer inspection, it appears that the only civil society groups with active campaigning positions in the Lisbon referendum were those against the Treaty. These were groups independent of the state and without a structured relationship with it in terms of funding or service-delivery contracts. Conversely, civil society organisations dependant on state funding appeared not to want to, or felt unable, to participate directly in this key campaign. While some groups like EAPN Ireland and CORI led strong information campaigns², generally civil society groups in structured policy or funding relationships with the state stayed silent on Lisbon. This implies that some civil society organisations feel implicit or explicit restrictions on their freedom to take political positions in national debate. This reflects a tradition in Irish civil society where groups are careful not to align themselves to political parties, a tradition that McCashin (2002) relates back to the tendency of the populist Fianna Fáil to co-opt civil society.

Contributors to this volume have argued that a legacy of Fianna Fáil's hold on power over the last two decades has been an intensification of this historical tendency to depoliticise civil society. Since 2002 the state became more ambitious in this regard. This strong directive control of the state has arguably had the strongest impact over on that part of civil society most traditionally associated with the community and voluntary sector. Ironically these very groups may have had most positive exposure to the benefits of Europe (they directly benefited from EU funding, they have been exposed to European Union institutions and, through their membership of European networks, they express solidarity with other marginalised groups in the Union). Has the state depoliticised and silenced the very voices it might like most to hear from in a second referendum? It is healthier for democracy if civil society is contributing to debate from many perspectives and not only from the more extreme spectrums on both the left and the right.

d) The absence of conflict in social partnership

Over the Celtic Tiger period, social partnership processes have monopolised the context in which distributional debate has happened. Some credit social partnership as being the cause of Ireland's more humane welfare trajectory, relative to the UK or the US. Others argue that social partnership can, through co-option, limit protest and smother the potential for more radical change. The period generally has been described as a missed opportunity when the state, despite enjoying the greatest resources ever, generally pursued a relatively inegalitarian fiscal policy. This highlights just how little influence social actors in many fora of social partnership have really had on key state policy. Rather social partnership was used to establish and maintain an elite-driven consensus that failed to achieve a fair balance between goals of efficiency and equity in the Irish political economy.

² The Irish European Anti-Poverty Network, with the support of the Communicating Europe Initiative of the Department of Foreign Affairs, organised three regional meetings in Tallaght, Sligo and Tipperary, and a national roundtable on the social dimension of the Lisbon Treaty in May 2008. It published an EAPN Ireland 'Review' with articles from a broad range of contributors from all sides of the debate on various dimensions of the Treaty from a social perspective and placing it in the context of developing a social Europe. It also made a 22 page submission to the National Forum on Europe which highlighted the debate on the social implications of the Lisbon Treaty. CORI, a significant voice in Irish social debate, also published a briefing paper and advised 'we never recommend how people should cast their vote but we strongly believe that people should vote'.

The elite-driven consensus was and is achieved by working in institutional processes designed to generate and maintain consensus at the expense of processes that might generate conflict about distributional policy. This is done by maintaining a strong narrative of shared understanding where 'social partners leave ideological differences outside the door and problem solve in the context of a shared understanding' (NESF 1997) In this way the state, explicitly and implicitly, by controlling funding and filtering social partnership participation, mitigates dissent from such hegemonic shared understanding. Participation in social partnership offers special challenges to civil society organizations which understandably wish to maximise opportunities for 'voice with influence' but also wish to avoid the smothering embrace of the state (Broderick, 2002).

e) Absence of political debate

Anne Marie Smith (1998: 7) argues that 'political struggle does nevertheless depend in part on the ability to imagine alternative worlds' It is not just through social partnership that the Irish state minimizes political debate. The state by way of funding strategies has helped create a monopoly role for some institutions in Irish discourse. ESRI analysis, for example, underpins social partnership (NESF and NESF) and anti-poverty institutions (Office for Social Inclusion). Kirby (2002) argues that ESRI analysis of poverty and social inclusion is epistemologically rooted in classical economics theory. The dominant poverty debate concerns technical issues about work incentives and replacement ratios, definitions and measurement of unemployment, definitions and measurement of poverty/inequality and, most recently, labour market impacts of migration. This narrow policy discourse limits public debate and acts as a barrier to entry into the policy community. It is possible to identify an alternative discourse about rights, equality and social spending and a discourse promoting family values, parenting and responsibility but this is far less prominent. Again historical trajectories are important in understanding the present. The Catholic social teaching which focused, in the early years of the state, on more absolutist forms of poverty reduction and charity (Acheson et al., 2004) is directly correlated with modern political acceptance of 'solidarity without equality' (Ó Riain and O'Connell, 2000:39). The impact of a shift to more individual values associated with neo-liberalism has further eroded societal support for equality.

The 2008 attempt to silence one of the most independent authoritative voices on poverty, the voice of the Combat Poverty Agency, is illustrative of how the state responds to any form of dissent from consensus on how to frame discourse on poverty. Combat Poverty has been a distinctive voice in Irish discourse promoting a wider and more humane discourse about poverty. Since 2002 the state has removed various functions from the Agency including its community development remit and its role funding of Anti Poverty Networks. The state has increasingly sought to control its public statements, requiring all press statements to be screened for veto by the Minister for Social and Family Affairs. Finally, in 2008, the Office for Social Exclusion established a seven-person review committee which, without due process and without considering alternative options, proposed to subsume the Combat Poverty Agency into the Department of Social and Family Affairs. This attempt happened when the poor were at their most vulnerable. Such a 'reform' of the Agency would make it part of a government Department and directly lead to a significant loss of its ability independently to identify and analyse the causes of poverty, comment

independently and authoritatively on it, objectively monitor and evaluate progress in tackling it and promote public awareness about it. It would also undermine the working relationship with community and voluntary sector groups working to tackle poverty. It therefore calls into question the principle of consultation with the poor which, according to the state's rhetoric, lies at the heart of the Irish partnership approaches to anti-poverty policy. Since other alternatives were available to government (such as Combat Poverty Agency transferring to the National Economic and Social Development Office), it seems that the state is using the opportunity of reform of its agencies to weaken the equality, rights and anti-poverty agencies that have played a powerful watchdog role for the most poor and vulnerable in our society.

State and civil society: a symbiotic relationship

The contributors to this book have thrown light on how state-civil society relationships have evolved over the period of the Celtic Tiger. What emerges is a picture of a state ever more determined to use its power to constitute a role for civil society that makes it subservient to the state, providing services to some of the most needy in Irish society (often on completely inadequate budgets and lacking any long-term security) but never daring to raise a critical voice about the glaring and scandalous injustices of that society, injustices it knows only too well from its daily activities. In doing this, its priority is to make Ireland safe for investment by multinational companies and to stifle any debate about the social impacts of the highly dependent model of development promoted by the Irish state.

In elaborating this critique, this book can be said to adopt a civil society view of the state. Clearly, a book that drew on the views of state authorities towards civil society would offer very different perspectives and it would be a very valuable exercise to undertake. Yet, whichever perspective is adopted, it is important continuously to bear in mind that the state has the whip hand in this relationship due to its control of funding (and, of course, its far greater ideological and coercive power). Clearly, as all the contributors have highlighted in different ways, the state exercises a lot of influence over the ways that civil society constitutes and organises itself, the goals it pursues and the means through which it pursues them. For example, in Chapter 3 Brian Harvey reminds us of a much more empowering and contestatory form of civil society activity that emerged from the Irish state's sponsoring of the National Pilot Schemes to Combat Poverty in the late 1970s, a programme that the state then killed off in the early 1980s when it got too uncomfortable with it. This reminds us of the power of the state in constituting civil society and the inadequacy of any view that sees civil society as a discrete entity that firstly constitutes itself and then afterwards establishes relationships with the state. Any reflection on the nature of Irish civil society, therefore, whether in the pre-independence period covered by Ó Broin and Kirby in Chapter 2, the period following independence as briefly surveyed by Harvey, or the Celtic Tiger period which is the principal focus of this book, cannot be understood without taking into account the ways in which the state helped constitute civil society. For example, it was the British colonial state that opened the spaces and even provided some of the organisational and funding possibilities that allowed a vibrant and creative civil society to flourish over the final decades of the 19th century and into the first decades of the 20th. It is paradoxical in the extreme, that a civil society activism that played such a key role in the emergence of an independence Irish state, should then be stifled and become highly dependent on that state for most of the 20th century.

Making this point reminds us that the state-civil society relationship is not a one-way street. It is not only that the state helps constitute civil society but also that civil society helps constitute the sort of state that exists. Ó Broin and Kirby illustrate how this happened in the immediate pre-independence period but the same point can be made about the sort of Irish state that emerged and remained dominant up to the period of the early Celtic Tiger. Particularly following the arrival of Fianna Fáil to electoral dominance in 1932, the Irish state came to be characterised by its finely honed ability to co-opt potentially dissident elements (and where this was not possible to make life so difficult for them that they often emigrated) through piecemeal and often small-scale projects and spending. This may have ensured that a conservative civil society faced few challenges but it also meant the constitution of a state notoriously lacking in the capacity for longer term planning, reacting to problems as they emerged rather than developing the ability for proactive planning. Particularly since the economic liberalisation of the early 1960s, it has been a state that has been remarkably dependent on outside economic interests, again illustrating the weak development of the capacities of civil society and also the lack of sustained pressure from civil society to constitute a more activist state. As is widely recognised, the independent Irish state became populist in its culture and clientelist in its predominant forms of acting.

Clearly civil society is not the only influence on constituting the state (outside influences such as multinational corporations or the EU, the legacies of history, and the nature of its own bureaucracy and political system also play major roles) but it is a major influence and it is difficult to explain the sort of state that emerged in Ireland in the 20th century without appreciating this point (see Adshead, Kirby and Millar, 2008). For example, a more independent and critical civil society would have challenged the dominance of Irish politics by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and have pressurised the Irish state to develop a more coherent and integrated welfare state. Acknowledging that not only does the state help constitute civil society but also that civil society in turn helps constitute and change the state draws attention to the importance of civil society resisting the subservient relationship and role into which it is currently being pushed. For, without a more activist and challenging civil society, it is difficult to know what influences could help constitute a state capable and willing of addressing with some determination the huge challenges of equality and sustainability of which it has been so shamefully negligent.

An analysis of contributions in this volume enables us to theorise further the state/civil society relationship at the end of the Celtic Tiger and make tentative conclusions about the health or otherwise of that relationship. We have argued that relative to the social transformation role played by civil society at the foundation of the state the relationship has been less political and mutually reciprocal and one that is more one-sided and dependant. It is also an increasingly market-oriented relationship. The value of civil society to the state has become one dimensional. The state's interest in nurturing civil society is limited to a very narrow understanding of active, citizenship, namely volunteering and providing social services.

Quo Vadis?

Geoghegan and Powell (2007: 48) argue that there is potential for a renewed discourse about alternatives and for active citizenship to re-imagine itself as a democratic force. This section examines how this might be progressed. Is it possible to recreate the vibrant role civil society organisations played in the emergence of the Irish state (see Chapter 2)? What can be done to ensure political and policy alternatives emerge from civil society? Acheson et al. (2004: 197) argue that to date the Irish state played a key role 'in structuring the civic space in which voluntary action occurs'. When the institutional space in which civil society does its work is largely state controlled, meaningful distributional debate is limited (Acheson et al., 2004). This begs the question of where and how civil society organisations position themselves in relation to the state. At least two things appear obvious. Firstly, civil society needs resources that are independent of the state. Secondly, civil society needs to organise itself in free space that is designed for and by civil society.

Taking the first question first, how to break free of being controlled by the state, the challenge is to break the historical trajectory described in these chapters and to struggle free from the cultural and ideological forces that have shaped Irish voluntary action and its development. Three strategies are required: organisation-level funding strategies, individual-level political activity, and strategies that give greater voice to the reality of poverty and inequality.

a) Civil society organisations need to enhance their ability to resist the implicit and explicit threats to funding that do indeed occur when groups vocalise counter-hegemonic discourse. Harvey's paper in this volume and the contemporary debate about the Charities Act illustrates the real and serious problems facing organisations seeking alternative funding sources to those of the state. Recognising such strategies can be 'frightening and unpredictable', Ledwith (2005: 7) encourages groups to feel the fear and take up the challenge. The key here is what conditions will enable civil society actors and groups to take the level of risk required to break free of state-controlled spaces and discourses. The question of solidarity is important as is Daly's advice to work cross-sectorally, building links between largely separate spheres of civil society, for example trade unions, new social movements, political parties and community and voluntary groups (Daly, 2007). This requires actively listening to each other and denying the state space proactively to build divisions between different groups within civil society.

b) The above comment is primarily about organisational decisions. However civil society organisations are managed by people, staff and volunteers, who are also citizens. As members of civil society each has their own individual relationship with the state, each votes, each can join a political party or take part in a protest march. If the challenge for civil society actors is to revive the very concept of active citizenship that the state is trying to bury, then there are personal as well as organisational challenges in doing this. The Irish state thrives on an apolitical civil society where many key actors go out of the way to demonstrate to the state their political neutrality. Taking up the challenge of radical participative democratic values means being open as staff, volunteers, residents and citizens to being politically active in civil society, with or without state funding. Despite the funding and institutional obstacles

described earlier much can be done, not only as professional workers but also through voluntary political activity.

c) Irish political culture promotes a non-ideological approach to political debate where political decisions about redistribution are reduced to technical statistical debates and where the dominant macro discourse revolves around competitiveness and employment growth. This discourse happens largely in exclusive spaces away from the public ear. A change in strategy is required to move debate outside closed policy forums or social partnership processes and into more public realms. These public realms could include more extensive use of media (such as newspaper letter writing campaigns or radio talk shows), and of local and national public meetings. The focus of such communication should be not technical debates but *telling it like it is*, voicing the reality of what it means to be poor or unequal in Ireland today and promoting the values that matter to civil society groups. This would result in a value-led communicative discourse.

The second question focused on how civil society can organise itself in some free space that is designed for and by civil society, how might it choose to restructure? Again three possible strategies emerge: rethinking social partnership strategies, organising in large cross-sectoral interest groups, and developing new political movements.

a) If the present institutional shape of civil society, dominated as it is by social partnership, militates against articulating an effective political discourse, then what can be done about this? Within civil society groups there are always tensions about strategy and whether to develop integrationist or conflict approaches to relationships with the state. A key debate in Irish civil society is whether or not to participate in social partnership. One way of approaching this debate is to avoid all or nothing choices of whether one should or should not participate. Rather, mindful of the tendency of social partnership to smother or silence political discourse, the question might be better rephrased *when and for what purposes should one participate in partnership processes?* Here we can distinguish the policy or problem-solving function of partnership from a more political function of partnership as a forum for redistributive political debate. Following Larragy (2001), redistributive political decisions in particular are better kept for the publicly accountable representative political system. This line of reasoning suggests civil society groups need to use social partnership sparingly and in particular avoid inappropriate use of the social partnership processes to develop policy that is more appropriately developed through public political dialogue and, when necessary, political conflict .

b) Given the sensitivity of the Irish Proportional Representation electoral system to well organised sectoral interests, the challenge for civil society groups is how they can organise into more pro-active long-term interest groups. For example, a national campaign for welfare reform could be built through a permanent coalition of the up to 40 groups who have a recognised interest in social security reform. This could move from a strategy of ineffective short-term pre-budget submissions towards more individual, personal engagement between lobbyists and civil servants (Acheson et al., 2004: 101). The sector was most influential when working through larger advocacy coalitions. The opposite is also true, when conflicting approaches were recognisable within the sector, governments manipulated the palpable differences as an excuse for

doing nothing. Joint policy development work across organisations would maximise the sector's power as a vested interest capable of influencing electoral outcomes.

c) What of civil society's role in spawning political opposition and being the traditional birthplace of new political movements? Is there capacity in Ireland for civil society to develop a new left-oriented political movement or movements? There are emerging political spaces in Irish civil society. These include new social movements, new self-organised identity-based movements including new migrants movements and, as explored earlier, new alliances of previously unconnected groups such as 'People before Profit'. Some of these groups have formed alliances with academic and trade-union communities. The Irish social science academic community has formed an Irish Social Science Platform, a by-product of which may be an enhanced contribution to public debate (see Kirby, 2008). Existing groups like the Community Platform continue to develop strategies to work together. Tasc, a think tank for action of social change has made public its interest in making alliances and promoting political debate. The Labour Party has established a Commission for the 21st century, examining its relationships with civil society actors like trade unions and is open to transforming and renewing itself as a political movement. A number of NGOs working on international issues – Comhlámh, the Debt and Development Coalition Ireland, the Africa Centre and the Latin America Support Centre (LASC) – has founded a new global justice movement, Bloom. All of these different dynamics are to date unplanned and ad hoc and there is no clear direction emerging. However, one fact can be stated with certainty, there is a critical mass of people interested in and actively working for urgent social change. Blyth (2002) and Hay (2004) argue that moments of transformation occur when critical junctures or opportunities arise and when people are organised sufficiently to impact on political debate and promote ideas that make sense in the context of that critical juncture. In the autumn of 2008, we saw emerging such a critical juncture in the global and national political economy. The opportunity is ripe for a new left social movement to rise to the challenge of being a natural counter weight to a political status quo that has generated such inequality, risk and vulnerability in people's lives .

Civil society organisations work best as the autonomous space between the market and the state. They influence the nature of political economy models and help ensure a better tradeoff between efficiency and equity considerations. While civil society actors often play a powerful role in organising a counter-discourse and influencing a state's political dynamic, they are also an important partner for states in attempting to manage in an increasingly complex globalised world. The problem in Ireland is that the historical trajectory of a deeply controlling state has muted civil society's capacity to be socially transformative. While this may have some short-term political advantage for the state, it has long-term disadvantages for all.

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