

# IRISH POLITICAL STUDIES

Review of

## **Questioning Ireland: Debates in Political Philosophy and Public Policy**

Edited by Joseph Dunne, Attracta Ingram and Frank Litton

Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2000 IR£25.00



by [Helena Sheehan](#)

De Valera's Ireland is dead and gone. We now live in a pluralist society and need to give this plurality full and free expression while still being a society. If any common theme can be taken from a book consisting of thirteen essays written by thirteen different authors, it is perhaps this. Of course, De Valera's Ireland had its dissidents, but there was nevertheless a degree of moral and political consensus, grounded in a common (theological) world view, which few societies can assume today. This has brought great freedom and stimulating diversity, but it has also brought much confusion and fragmentation and alienation. This book takes on the complexities of this world. Some of the issues raised are: the relationship of the state to globalisation, to the nation, to civil society, to the market, to the underclass, to the individual.

Shane O'Neill articulates the strengths and the weaknesses of liberalism as the basis for a democratic society where the state cannot privilege any one position on such matters as the existence of God, the rights of animals, the validity of various sexual practices. Because the state must be neutral with respect to deeply held but ultimately irreconcilable convictions, there is concern that this gives rise to a conception of politics that is too weak and vacuous to provide a basis for political morality. He upholds a modified liberalism in which reasonable convictions are expressed and respected. Iseult Honohan explores the same question in terms of the theoretical debates between liberalism and communitarianism as expressed in controversies occupying Irish society in recent decades, particularly over abortion and divorce. She comes down more on the communitarian side and rejects the basic liberal idea of the neutral state, arguing for the possibility of a richer politics in which substantive moral convictions have a place in demanding that the state support certain common goods. She does see such convictions as being in flux, in need of constant renegotiation and warns against hasty conclusions from this, especially when it comes to embedding such convictions in constitutional or legislative restrictions.

Whatever about whether and to what degree the state should detach itself from contrasting world views and ethical convictions, most authors would agree that it should disengage from the ethnocultural nation. Attracta Ingram puts this case most explicitly. The forces of globalisation and pluralism have created more multicultural societies in which citizenship must be grounded in universal political values that can be reconciled with the particular values of various ethnocultural identities. Although there is an inexorable development in this direction, despite all countervailing forces, there is a considerable institutional lag. She claims that there are as yet no constitutions for pluralism and the Constitutional Review Group in Ireland did not rise to this challenge.

There is much more in this book. John Baker addresses the concrete inequalities of Irish society and proposes a series of practical measures which would systematically reduce inequality over time. John Barry deals with green politics and the tension between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Philip Pettit connects a contestatory theory of democracy and a republican ideal of freedom as non-domination which delegitimises asymmetries of power with prison policy. Frank Litton defends the civil service in terms of an analysis of the state and the market that contests the position of the new right and the inroads it has made on the idea of the civil service. Rory O'Donnell recommends social partnership as a move from a pluralist free-for-all to a more structured process of interest group interaction as a productive way of combining the advantages of liberalism with neo-corporatism. Fergus Armstrong examines the shareholder versus stakeholder debate and advocates richer approaches to collaborative enterprise than market hegemony in Irish business culture. Austin Flannery surveys the involvement of priests in politics.

It is striking how little the terms of discourse in this book articulate contestation in terms of right and left, a sign of our centrist times. Not altogether absent, however, and Denis Turner's critique of liberalism and postmodernism is more explicitly ideological than most other essays. He analyses the upheavals in the family, property and the state in terms of the bourgeoisification of Irish society with all its attendant illusions about itself. He shows the paradoxes of the politics of liberal self interest disguised to parade as in the interests of all and of the supposed foundationlessness of postmodernism as founded in the reality of capitalism.

Many of the essays are written in an academic style which sometimes seems thin and unengaging. Although they intend to connect foundational theory with specific practice and they largely succeed in doing so, they do not always do so in a way that is vivid and full blooded. Ironically Maeve Cooke's essay on feminism and justice, which counterposes the dominant (masculine) tradition of abstract universalist theory with feminist critique and an emphasis on the concrete, particular, affective and sensuous is the most ethereal and disembodied contribution in the book.

In contrast to this is the description of the academic style of Fergal O'Connor OP, to whom this volume is dedicated. Most of the contributors to this festschrift have been his students in the Department of Ethics and Politics at UCD. Joseph Dunne's essay on the drama of ideas which unfolded in his lectures on political philosophy is perhaps the most memorable of this book.

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