

## REPUBLICANISM REVISITED

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In a study of republicanism, Philip Pettit argued that the republican concept of freedom should be seen as the 'non-domination' of individuals and collectives. Thus -

"Freedom as non-domination requires that a person not be exposed to the possibility of interference on an arbitrary basis. . . The idea is dynamic. The notion of what makes an exercise of power arbitrary is systematically developmental. . . To endorse republican freedom is not to accept a ready made ideal that can be applied in a mechanical way . . . It is to embrace an open-ended ideal. . ." (1)

It is perhaps the tragedy of Irish Republicanism that it became a product fast frozen by nationalism, to be transferred from one generation to the next, with the appropriate brand names attached.

This apparent victory of the mechanical has led at least one political analyst to query whether -  
"Irish republicanism was to become a synonym for Irish nationalism. Or to put it another way, the idea of a Republic became less an end in itself, than a means towards a nationalist end." (2)

It would seem that this assertion begs the questions (a) How valid is the concept of republicanism as an end in itself? (b) How feasible is it to disentangle republicanism from nationalism in the context of Ireland? and (c) What value has a revisited dynamic concept of republicanism, and more specifically, civic republicanism?

This contribution seeks to initiate a discussion around these questions, and to consider them against the complex backdrop of historical legacy and the challenges that currently demand attention.

### THE HISTORICAL LEGACY

Republicanism is a word to conjure with in Ireland - whether North or South. Emotions and interpretations around the concept, and more importantly in relation to its implications, are as divided as the island itself. Whether it is defined by the most recent wall slogans in nationalist West Belfast, or is rubbished by an historical revisionism that at root is tortured by the Yeatsian quandary - "Did that play of mine send out certain men the English shot?" (3), the arguments around republicanism are still waged with vigour.

In 1974, a Repsol pamphlet (a reprint of a 1966 edition) was circulated by the Republican Education Department of the then Republican Clubs - later to become the Workers' Party. It held -  
"The association of national freedom with a republican form of government originated in the 1798 period . . . Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen were the first to raise the demand for an independent Irish Republic. . ." (4)

Enter, stage left, the influence of both the American and, more radical, French revolutions which was to be deployed in an Irish setting against the British connection. Indeed in the specific circumstances of Ireland one of the applications of 18th century republican ideology was to be a translation of the individual rejection of arbitrary power to an assumed collective rejection of the exercise of such power by another state - also a feature of the American Revolution. The contemporary use of the terminology 'slavery' and 'oppression' underlined this translation. While separation from Britain had long been an issue for the United Irishmen (5) the commencement of hostilities between Britain and France in 1793, and the introduction of draconian anti-insurgency measures, resulted in an increased emphasis being placed on this strategic aspect. By 1795, Tone, Thomas Russell, Samuel Neilson, the Simms brothers, Henry McCracken "and one or two more", climbed to MacArt's Fort at the summit of Belfast's Cave Hill, and took a solemn obligation  
". . . Never to desist in our efforts until we have subverted the authority of England over our country and asserted her independence. . ." (6).

In his trial in 1798, Wolfe Tone was to re-iterate his belief in the separatist cause, but to link it with the concept of citizenship which lies at the core of civic republicanism -

"The connexion of England, I have ever considered the bane of Ireland and have done everything in my power to break it, and to raise three million of my countrymen to the rank of citizens." (7)

It was this sentiment that was to be remembered as Tone's epitaph, alongside his call for the unity of Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters (8) in this cause.

What developed over the following two centuries may be described in general terms as the growing hegemony of Irish nationalism. Writing a history of the Irish Republican Army in 1972, J. Bowyer Bell concluded -

“For a few, generation after generation, what Pearse and Connolly began in the name of Tone on April 24th 1916, is an unfinished legacy - but a clearly defined responsibility. As long as the British border cuts across the Republic of 1916, as long as Ireland and its people are neither free of exploitation nor Gaelic in tongue and heart, then men will turn to the task as defined by Tone, no matter how bleak the prospects; to do less would be to betray the past and deny the future. . .” (9)

The Tone who was so little enamoured with the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792 (“The harpers again, Strum, strum and be hanged. . .” July 13th. in his Diary) may well not recognise cultural aspects of the new republicanism, or even its definition, given the heightened sense of national identity in the new strung republican quest. What has since been described as the “simple and apostolic tradition of nationalism” (10) had in effect taken root, nurtured by cultural demands, and inspired by concepts of popular sovereignty and national self-determination.

If Ireland was no different from many other European countries in developing a sense of nationalism throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, the intellectual legacies left by the process have tended to subsume the potentially more radical aspects of late 18th century republicanism. Certainly if the rhetorical benchmark of Irish nationalist hegemony is taken as the 1937 *Bunreacht na hEireann* (Constitution of the Republic of Ireland) then it is apparent that the radical influence of civic republicanism had been all but dispersed by the vision of an Ireland, not free only, but Gaelic and piously Catholic as well.

In essence the nationalist hegemony also came to encompass prevailing views about republicanism - even if some elements of the ‘Republican Family’ continued to espouse a degree of social and civic radicalism. What was presented to those who remained outside of the hegemonic bloc was, in effect, a continuum which ran from a Catholic, Gaelic, ethnic identity at the one extreme, to revolutionary radicalism at the other, but held together by the binding force of national separatism. Concepts such as Irish self-determination; the territorial integrity of the island (inherited from British administrative policy) and separation from the (imperialist/neo-colonial) influence of Britain, placed the emphasis on the integral nation-state, rather than on republicanism per se. Although it was taken for granted that the latter was a code word for, and encompassed, the former.

## THE OTHER HISTORY

The apparent seamlessness of the Republican tradition has effectively written out of the historical script those in Ireland who could not identify with it. Characterised as vested interests; victims of false consciousness; or simply reactionary elements, there was neither a confidence in Tone’s aspiration to unite Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters, or any much investment made in realising such a strategy. J. Bowyer Bell also probed the political perspective of the Ulster, British, Protestant tradition, identifying that for many -

“An united Ireland would be a nationalist Ireland, and as such an Ireland that would be dominated not only by a Gaelic ethos, but by a Catholic one. Only the republicans imagined themselves non-sectarian. They had been misinformed by their own indulgences and hidden agenda; they were Catholic and so acted, defended ‘their people’, allied themselves with other Catholics in a pan-nationalist front. . .” (11)

In addition to these sentiments, there was a deep frustration felt at the failure by Irish nationalism to either attempt to understand, or take seriously, the position of the British Ulster tradition as defined in its own terms.

A sense of insecurity and fear was also evident amongst a population who were a minority and a majority people, simultaneously - a majority within Northern Ireland (which itself was dependant on an increasingly unreliable British guarantee), but a minority on the island of Ireland (12). Thus the Northern Ireland state was conscious of its beleaguered position on the island of Ireland, while being fearful of the implication of having a sizeable minority of perceived disloyal Catholic nationalists within its borders. The latter, in turn, both resented and feared the implications of being treated as distrusted, second-class citizens on ‘their own’ island. The dividing lines were marked primarily by

national identity, ably reinforced by religious persuasion. Civil and religious liberties in practice became relegated to slogans on banners, as they were increasingly undermined by an ongoing sense of political crisis, and became caught up in the contradiction of 'theirs' or 'ours'.

Michael Ignatieff, writing about the Balkans, has suggested that -  
"Cosmopolitanism is the privilege of those who can take a secure nation-state for granted" (13). This might also be held to be true for liberalism. For different reasons the defensiveness of the societies on both sides of the Border hindered any effective examination of the concepts intrinsic to radical republicanism. The emphasis for many years in the South was to prove that the state could work within the framework of relatively conservative nationalism (although entry to the European Union was to open up that society to a wider range of possibilities); while the impetus within Northern Ireland was to ensure that the state survived per se. Issues such as civil liberties, social justice, not to mention equity or secularism, came to be seen as optional extras, or even as threats, in circumstances of conflicting and unresolved national dilemmas. These dilemmas were characterised by a dual majoritarian interpretation of self-determination. The one rooted in historic Irish nationalism (as expressed by the Proclamation of 1916; the General Election of 1918, and ratified by Bunreacht na hEireann), and the other based on the political pragmatism of a state some 70 plus years in existence, underpinned by the guarantee embodied in the Government of Ireland Act, and the express will of the majority of the citizens within Northern Ireland to remain British.

In reality, political fixation on the dilemmas and contradictions posed by both a divided island and a divided society within Northern Ireland, left little energy or space for exploration of the potential of either civic Unionism or civic Republicanism, however defined. Equally discouraging was the development of the 1980's, when an increasingly confidence Republic of Ireland took refuge in a growing sense of partitionism as the violence of the conflict within the North became both an embarrassment and, at times, a threat. Both the lack of interest message conveyed by this position, and a political revisionism that sought easy scapegoats, did little to encourage constructive debate within either nationalism or unionism.

#### THE CHALLENGES OF CIVIC REPUBLICANISM

If the classical tradition of civic republicanism viewed -  
". . . The deliberations and commitments of the whole body politic as integral to the realisation of a free society; that is, a political theory that considered citizen self-rule as the necessary condition of political liberty." (14)

Then there is both an acceptance of the intrinsic value of politics to realise that end, and a rejection of arbitrary authority that can confound the project. Tom Paine identified the feudal institution of monarchy as being the epitome of such arbitrariness, and argued that -

"Republican government is no other than government established and conducted for the interest of the public as well individually as collectively". (15)

Mindful of Pettit's warning that the power of the concept also includes its dynamic nature, by the late 18th century democratic self-rule and representative government came to be viewed as the most effective means of furthering liberty.

The struggle to extend the inclusive nature of citizenship was of course to continue throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries (with only a proportion of women being brought into the electorate by the Representation of the People Act which allowed them to vote in the 1918 General Election). Within Ireland, however, Wolfe Tone had set the project as being inextricably linked to breaking the connection with Britain. In this way, his philosophy went considerably further than the most recent wall slogan in nationalist Belfast - "Brits Out - 1978 - 1998 !" For Tone, set in his historical era, the realisation of civic republicanism was, as in America, dependant on breaking the link with Britain, and for the majority of the United Irishmen it was the quest for extended citizenship that took precedence. (16)

Although the demands for an active, inclusive citizenship and national self-determination can clearly be complementary, equally the two do not necessarily follow. The impact of an increasing emphasis on ethno-cultural nationalism, mobilised around a strong sense of national identity that was projected as natural, can be seen as introducing an exclusive element into the political debate. In essence an onus

was placed on those not of 'native stock' (loosely defined as Catholic, Irish) to opt into the nation in formation. In practice, as in the case of many other aspiring nation-states, some of the more eloquent advocates of national identity were those who made this deliberate choice. What was in danger of being lost in the process was the recognition that the liberty to develop a political project that would extend effective republicanism, meant more than freedom from Britain to be more genuinely Irish.

It is true that over the decades a more radical view of liberty, self-determination and indeed the republican project, did continue to exist among a number of self-professed republicans. The members of the Republican Congress are a case in point, who accepted the need to use Irish independence as an essential framework to create an inclusive political arena, to enable engagement in a broader dialogue with the purpose of creating conditions for a more equitable and just society. This is a perspective however, that has often been forced to the margins of nationalism. It is also a perspective that itself suffers from a certain fixed approach that suggests that the task at hand is 'the re-conquest of Ireland', and that once that is achieved inclusive systems of a progressive nature can be established. In more simple nationalist terms this approach has been summed up in the suggestion that the political project is to 'build the house first, and then we can furnish it'.

The core challenge of a civic republicanism that can include people from all traditions in Ireland in designing the political project remains. This challenge cannot be effectively answered by the simplistic slogan 'Brits Out' - particularly in circumstances where the nature of the British political system, and indeed of British involvement in Ireland, is quite different than it was in the 18th, 19th, or even early 20th centuries. Similarly, where the nature of Unionism and Loyalism have also been undergoing considerable reassessment. Paraphrasing Marx, we need to work for a collective understanding of the current situation before we can change it.

#### THE POTENTIAL OF CIVIC REPUBLICANISM

The relevance of civic republicanism in the late 18th century was that it answered real needs in the historical context of the time, while offering a freshness of ideas and a vision for the future. While Wordsworth was celebrating "the joy of being alive" at such a time, politically active Corresponding Societies in Ireland, Scotland and England were adapting republicanism and Jacobinism to local circumstances. Two hundred years later the need for this powerful combination of vision, strategy and tactics, is still required. In order to be effectively inclusive the impetus for this approach must shift back from nationalism to republicanism, and be prepared to accept the benefits of a heterogeneous society, in place of the homogenizing myths of national identity. There is also the crucial strategic challenge of how democratic republicanism can deliver on equality while accommodating, and indeed welcoming, difference. (17)

It is now timely to develop work around a new vision for civic republicanism in Ireland - North and South - as the old certainties are being fractured and the diminution of political violence creates the potential for a healing process to commence. It is recognised that both these developments will take time, but may well be facilitated by an inclusive dialogue about the essential elements of any new political order. At a tactical level, however, the process for such a dialogue is important, as active citizenship in this context can often be inclusive in principle, but exclusive in practice. Experience has shown that nationalists and the middle class all too often have a clear edge in describing their aspirations and long-term political perspectives. Processes must be developed to ensure a parity of participation in the political discourse.

The insights of the Women's Movement are an important resource in designing strategies and tactics that seek to ensure the reflection of different voices, and by challenging the practical applicability of universalist concepts and abstract visions. For all too long women's experience has been one of being written out of history, or being seen as a token presence. At the flowering of civic republicanism in France, Olympe de Gouges went to the guillotine in 1793 for a tactical miscalculation in promoting her Declaration of the Rights of Woman, written two years previously. (18) Concerns have also been expressed at the manner in which civic republicanism can seem -  
". . . To smuggle real live men into the seemingly abstract and innocent universals that nourish political thought. The 'individual' or the 'citizen' are obvious candidates here. . ." (19)

In short, women have learned the hard way that inclusion cannot be taken for granted, and that lack of accessible transport or childcare can be as effective an exclusionary device as philosophical equivocation or evasion.

At a strategic level it must be accepted that any effective inclusive engagement in a project to develop civic republicanism in practice will only be achieved when there is a basic sense of security established for minorities within the societies that coexist on the island. This sense of security has to be underpinned by effective policies of equality, equity and protection of human rights, while also allowing the space and respect for differing senses of identity, allegiance and citizenship. In the real politik of the wall slogans there needs to be a clear acceptance that the current situation dictates that the loyalist calculation of "6 into 26 won't go!" makes more political and mathematical sense than the new Republican Sinn Fein formulation of "6 + 26 = 1!" However while mathematics is a rigid science, it must also be accepted that politics is dynamic.

If nationalists can no longer rely on demands for an arbitrary imposition of all-island majoritarianism, it must also be accepted that limitations on the exercise of arbitrary power cuts both ways. There is an onus on the proponents of a new, porous Northern Ireland to implement a system that will facilitate the development of a shared democracy rooted in the concepts of active citizenship, however that citizenship may be defined by those involved. Active citizenship places an emphasis on people, and encourages political activity and responsibility on a broad participative basis - or phrased in Rousseau's terms, to -

"Share in the operation of one's own life" (20),

and the conditions within which that life is acted out. In practical terms the translation of the theory of active citizenship into reality requires not only a responsive system of representative democracy, but also the supplementary processes and structures that can effectively offer a channel and format to the exercise of such citizenship.

The current political movement across the island of Ireland, and within British-Irish relationships, provides a timely context for the development of more imaginary and inclusive approaches. It is crucial, however, that the professional class of politicians develop the self-confidence not to fear the implications or impact of a more genuinely participative politics. Proposals for the Northern, and the North-South, Civic Fora contained in the April 1998 Agreement, are but an experimental step in this direction. In essence such proposals are based on a redefinition of what might be considered as 'political' in the classical sense, and to re-negotiate a balance between representative democracy and the politics of difference.

The dynamic concept of civic republicanism can accommodate a politics of difference within the important parameters of non-domination and seeking to develop a dialogue around the aspiration of a common good. As Iris Young has argued -

"We must develop participatory theory not on the assumption of an undifferentiated humanity, but rather on the assumption that there are group differences and that some groups are actually or potentially oppressed or disadvantaged." (21)

The challenge is to create a complementarity of approach that facilitates the representation of these differences alongside the more traditional representative democracy. Citizenship must encompass both individual equity, and more specific group concerns that are often in danger of being relegated to the outer reaches of political denial.

While there are clear dangers in institutionalising group representation, there is a need to examine how those groups that have been most excluded from the political process can be facilitated to both formulate an input into policy and be actively enabled to participate in a politics of inclusion. Strategies to address this issue would effectively build a real sense of citizenship that would go far beyond any ascribed sense of national hegemony. Active citizenship and participation would be based in the articulation of real needs and concerns, rather than a fear of not belonging to a national identity, or being caught in an eddy by the tide of history.

Returning to Pettit's portrayal of civic republicanism as 'an open-ended ideal', it does seem to be a valuable concept to allow for a new dialogue, and opportunity for engagement, around what people

might envisage and aspire to in the future. Civic republicanism seeks allegiance on the basis further outlined by Pettit -

“We can surely identify with the republican polity for the fact that it gives each of us, and each of us to the extent that it gives all, the measure of non-domination that goes with being a fully incorporated member; a fully authorised and a fully recognised citizen. If we cherish our own citizenship and our freedom, we have to cherish at the same time the social body in the membership of which that status consists. . .” (22)

In other words there is the responsibility of a quid pro quo which hopefully allows us to go beyond the ‘them’ and the ‘us’ both within Northern Ireland, and between North and South. If civic republicanism can help us achieve this then the concept is a valuable one.

It is clear, however, that if this process is to be inclusive then it must go beyond the fast frozen nationalist objectification of Ireland and the Irish. While the past deserves to be judged on its own terms, the Cathleen Ni Houlihan of the 1990’s is more likely to be on a plane to Brussels than to be patiently, if mournfully, awaiting rescue by the heroic - invariably male figure - of historical myth. The deliberate bolstering of a sense of ethnicity by both majority and minority communities within Northern Ireland over the last decade and a half, has been less than helpful when it is projected in an exclusive manner. It is, nevertheless, just possible that there is now a window of opportunity to replace this complex mix of insecurity and triumphalism with an attempt at an honest dialogue about the implications of post-nationalist republicanism. This may allow us the room to seek a resolution of the ‘unresolved national question’ within a different, and more positive, dimension.

This then is the value of a revisited dynamic concept of civic republicanism. It can offer the basis for the development of a shared vision of a new politics on a shared, if still disputed, island - with the additional guarantee for the Unionist population of an ongoing relationship between these islands. There is the possibility that the elements of dispute can themselves be eventually transcended by a political system that creates the space for a sense of belonging that stretches beyond exclusive identities. This is not to discount the very real fears, uncertainties and difficulties that must still be taken into account, but it also recognises that any new politics must address values and tasks that cannot be constrained by current boundaries or borders. In this way a dynamic sense of civic republicanism can help us meet the challenge in the new millennium of updating Wolfe Tone’s task of uniting Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter in the common name of Irishmen, by seeking to unite the population of the communities and identities that comprise this island in the common good of developing a society that can effectively address the requirements of equity, inclusion and human rights.

#### NOTES

- (1) P. Pettit, ‘Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government’, p. 147 (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997)
- (2) R. Kearney, ‘Post Nationalist Ireland’, p.35 (Routledge, 1997)
- (3) W.B. Yeats, ‘A Terrible Beauty is Born’ in ‘Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats’ (Macmillan 1961)
- (4) Republicanism Part 1, 1790-1922 (Repsol Pamphlet, No. 8, 1974)
- (5) The Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone ed. by his son (Washington 1826) cited in M. McNeill, ‘The Life and Times of Mary Ann McCracken 1770-1866’, (Blackstaff Press 1988)
- (6) O. Knox, ‘Rebels and Informers’, p. 158 (
- (7) Howell, ‘State Trials xxvii, p. 616, cited in O. Knox, Op. Cit., p. 257
- (8) T. W. Tone, Memoirs (1) p. 64 cited in O. Knox, Op. Cit. - albeit Tone had a degree of concern over the influence of Catholic priests who he described as ‘low bred rustics of vulgar sentiment’.
- (9) J. Bowyer Bell, ‘The Secret Army’, pp. 435/436 (Sphere 1972)
- (10) ‘The Making of Modern Irish History’, in D.G. Boyce and A. O’Day, eds. ‘Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy, (Routledge 1996)
- (11) J. Bowyer Bell, ‘Back to the Future - The Protestants and a United Ireland’, pp. 12/13 (Poolbeg 1996)
- (12) Minority Rights Group, London (1990) cited in T. Hylland Eriksen, ‘Ethnicity and Nationalism’, p.121 (Pluto Press 1993)
- (13) M. Ignatieff, cited in M. Canovan, ‘Nationhood and Political Theory’ (Edward Elgar 1996)
- (14) N. Porter, ‘Rethinking Unionism’, p. 107 (Blackstaff 1996)

- (15) T. Paine, 'The Rights of Man', cited in P. Pettit, Op. Cit. p.202
- (16) See Drennan Letters, cited in O. Knox, Op. Cit. p. 85 ("Our present pursuits ought to terminate in an equal and impartial representation of the people, and let posterity go on to republicanism if they choose . ." W. Drennan)
- (17) For further discussion of this important question see A. Phillips, 'Democracy and Difference', pp. 90/103 in 'Democracy and Difference;' (Polity Press, 1993)
- (18) Olympe de Gouges was executed as a royalist sympathiser for appealing to Queen Marie Antoinette to speak out in the name of all women - a serious mistake under the circumstances.
- (19) A. Phillips, 'Citizenship and Feminist Theory' in 'Democracy and Difference', Op. Cit. p. 77
- (20) Cited in P. Barry Clarke, 'Deep Citizenship', p. 23 (Pluto Press 1996)
- (21) I. Young, 'Policy and Group Difference', cited in A. Phillips, Op. Cit. pp 95/96
- (22) P. Pettit, Op. Cit. p. 260