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# **CIVIL SOCIETY**

*Perspectives and Reflections*



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# FOREWORD



What is civil society? Broadly speaking, it is a coming together of people working in pursuit of common interests and values through formal and informal organisations. Civil Society encompasses all the organisations and associations that operate outside of the state and the commercial market with the view to improve society. In short, it is citizens working together for the “common good”.

Ireland has a long and proud tradition of volunteerism and social activism (citizens working together for the “common good”). Historically, these values have been expressed through the activities of religious institutions, political groupings and the trade union movement. However, towards the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, civil society in Ireland grew more diverse, and in the 80s and 90s there was a proliferation of independently governed community and voluntary organisations, charities and non-governmental development organisations.

It is against this background that, in 1999, 200 community and voluntary organisations gathered in Dublin to discuss a bold new idea. This idea was first articulated by the late Dr. Mary Redmond, a respected lawyer and the founder of the Irish Hospice Foundation. Dr. Redmond proposed a new initiative to coordinate greater collaboration in the community voluntary sector. She used the symbol of a wheel to illustrate the concept:

“its spokes, accommodating the rich diversity of the voluntary sector, its centre the distillation of the great energy that drives it.”

From this simple concept grew a national movement, and today The Wheel is a dynamic national organisation with over 1,600 members. We are both a representative voice and a supportive resource that offers influence, leadership, advice, training and support for the sector.

Member organisations of The Wheel include Ireland’s leading charities, community and voluntary organisations and social enterprises. They are large and small, local and national, rural and urban. They deal with a plethora of issues ranging from service delivery, to community action, to advocacy on behalf of marginalised and disadvantaged communities and groups.

A notable feature of our recent work has been increased co-operation with government and relevant state agencies. An example of the positive outcome is the development of three new overarching policies currently being finalised by government - on volunteering, on social enterprise and on the overall community and voluntary sector. We are working actively with relevant government departments and others in our sector to ensure the best possible outcome from these policies.

Our growth and that of the sector has not occurred without many new challenges and an ever-increasing strain on the resources of most organisations. This ranges from pressure to maintain and develop service delivery and advocacy to responding to unnecessary duplication of reporting requirements.

In this, our twentieth year, we are reflecting on both our own journey and the development of Ireland's civil society space over the past two decades as well as on possible future directions for our sector. I believe that our sector is the heart and conscience of the nation. It is the driver of positive values and transformative actions. It accelerates social progress and puts the brakes on excesses of greed and individualism. It rebalances the tensions between the influential and the marginalised; the insiders and the outsiders, the powerful and the weak. That is why The Wheel is proud to represent – and be a strong voice for – this sector. And that's why we're passionate and determined to do an exemplary and effective job supporting wonderful people and organisations who work so hard and single-mindedly to ensure that equality, fairness, opportunity and participation are the DNA markers of what it means to be Irish.

As part of marking our twentieth year, we have invited a number of civil society leaders to share their perspectives and personal reflections. I would like to thank them sincerely for their contributions, and I am delighted to share them with you in this collection of essays.

It is our hope that this volume will contribute to the larger debate about active citizenship and the future of civil society.

Deirdre Garvey,  
Chief Executive Officer, The Wheel  
June 2019

# **SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP – A NEW AUTHORITY?**

**Dr. Mary Redmond**



*The following paper was originally presented at the Céifin Conference in 1998. It was later included in a volume entitled 'Are We Forgetting Something' (Kennedy and Bohan, 1998). This paper includes the seeds of ideas that would lead to the foundation of The Wheel in 1999.*

“The computer turns the untrammelled market into a global juggernaut crashing across frontiers, enfeebling national powers of taxation and regulation, undercutting national management of interest rates and exchange rates, widening disparities of wealth both within and between nations, dragging down labour standards, degrading the environment, denying nations the shaping of their own economic destiny, accountable to no-one, creating a world economy, without a world policy. Where is democracy now?”

In the information society, the society of the new millennium, jobs are changing rapidly, as the European Commission in its Green Paper *Living and Working in the Information Society* (People First, 1996), reminds us. There is a decline in continuous fulltime working



and a corresponding surge in atypical work and self-employment.

Yet from the beginning our civilisation has been structured more or less around the concept of work. This applied to the hunter-gatherer, to the farmer, to the medieval craftsman, to the line worker in the factory this century. Work as we know it is being systematically eliminated. A recent book, *The Corrosion of Character, the Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, by Richard Sennett, suggests that it is time to take a sober look at the way we work. There have been radical changes in the course of the recent economic boom. Perhaps one of the most persistent is 'no long-term' - the concept of employability. Sennett argues that the flexible work ethic undermines self-discipline and does employees real social and personal damage.

The European Commission in its paper attempts to stimulate public debate around its concern, amongst other things, that the information society will produce great divisions between the digital elite and their opposite numbers.

Because the importance of formal work in our lives is diminishing, because of the increasing dependencies of poverty and disadvantage in our society, an alternative vision must be found.

During this conference [Céifin Conference, 1998] we have heard about what we may be forgetting in the society of the new millennium. We have heard of the importance of catering for spiritual as well as economic needs in Ireland's current economic success, and that we must

work towards partnerships of different kinds, between 'ordinary people', voluntary organisations, corporations and the State. Europe must search for a soul as a matter of urgency.

It is social entrepreneurs, I believe, who will provide the alternative vision that is needed to complement the information society. In the community and voluntary sector soul is alive and feeling. By 'soul' I mean moral or emotional or intellectual life - spirituality.

Voluntarism brings forth an energy or intensity in the community which is emotional and intellectual. It is driven by the vast energy that makes up human life all around us. To those in the voluntary sector, value in life is not solely the attaining of some aim through creating something of material value. The 'meaning of life' is not a question one can devote much time to - instead the social entrepreneur thinks of herself as being questioned by life, daily. For the social entrepreneur the answer consists not in talk and research and position papers but in right action and in right conduct - in a conviction that if we want to hear more of the good rather than of the bad we must take responsibility for it. We must do it ourselves. Some unidentified 'they' will not do it for us. Nor is 'their' permission needed to take action.

What are social entrepreneurs? Not all who are involved in voluntary work are social entrepreneurs. They are harbingers of change, people in innovative voluntary organisations who devise new ways to provide support and development for those excluded from the opportunities of the information society.

They identify under-utilised resources: people, buildings and equipment. Their output is social; they promote health, welfare and well-being. Their core assets are forms of social capital: relationships, networks, trust and co-operation. In turn this gives access to physical (e.g. rundown buildings) and to financial (fundraising, donations, corporate giving) capital. The social entrepreneur needs to find the right human capital. Eventually the work begins to pay dividends. The organisation is social in the sense that it is not owned by shareholders and does not pursue profit as its main objective.

Innovativeness and vision are essential. The stakeholders are the community, the beneficiaries, staff, volunteers and investors/partners.

Above all, the activity is not for profit. It is the activity of the gift economy. The gift of a person, him or herself, their time, their talents, their energies. When we give of ourselves we truly give. Khalil Gibran said:

“There are those who give little of the much which they have - and they give it for recognition.... And there are those who have little and give it all. These are the believers in life.... There are those who give with joy, and that joy is their reward. And there are those who give with pain, and that pain is their baptism. And there are those who give and know not pain in giving, nor do they seek joy, nor give with mindfulness of virtue....”

Giving in the voluntary sector likewise has many mansions. Some give from a cup, others from a surging

river. Voluntary organisations, public corporations and the private sector intersect like three large circles. Where they intersect in common segments you will find entrepreneurs.

There is a lot happening at the moment. A White Paper on supporting voluntary activity is imminent. The idea of a community trust is under active study, and this will involve the public and private sector together supporting voluntary activity. These initiatives stem from the State.

I don't think we are forgetting the voluntary sector, therefore, but can it be called a new authority as the title of my paper asks?

Potentially, yes. As of yet, no.

There is something missing in the voluntary sector. It is the gelling of its energy into a powerful countervailing view of the 'voluntary sector', capable of anything, including influencing and even setting the agenda for this nation.

The notion has surfaced before. It is not new. It has generally been received with little enthusiasm because it belongs to the category of 'impossible to do'.

Recall that the vision of technological utopians, that people would go and machines come in their place, was unattainable just a hundred years ago. When the time is right, things happen.

We all agree that the time is right to supplement (not supplant) the values of the marketplace which have predominated to date.

The social entrepreneur is not yet the new authority because at present voluntarism is dotted all around the margins of public and private life. In places voluntarism is strong, in others it is weak. It is organised, it is disorganised. It is big, it is small. It is well-resourced, it is under-resourced. It - all of it - needs to be brought to the centre.

Politics is the 'art of the possible' as Lord Butler said. What is being suggested here is political, but not in a party political way. Understanding and bringing leadership (action) to bear on the implications of the Information Age is an imperative. A leader is someone who doesn't like to go anywhere by herself, and I am happy to say that mine is not a lone voice.

There are others who would attempt 'the art of the possible', try to make something more cohesive out of the voluntary sector, and with their permission I shall name them: Fr. Sean Healy, Sr. Brigid Reynolds, Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy, Fr. Peter McVerry, Sr. Bernadette McMahon, Sr. Phyllis Lee, Sr. Eileen Foley, Sr. Mairead Kelly, Sr. Bridget Callaghan, Ms Kay Conroy, Ms Mary Paula Walsh, Ms Carole Shubotham, Mr Brendan Collins, Mr Denis MacNamara and Mr Alan Mitchell. We have met a few times and as we continue to meet we want more and more to join us.

My paper is about a voice - as yet unheard as a 'new authority' - that of the voluntary sector.

The wheel of voluntarism is yet unturned. Think of how powerful it will be when it is turning, its spokes accommodating the rich diversity of the voluntary sector, its centre the distillation of the great energy which drives it.

The origin of these meetings started for me when I addressed the Dublin Chamber of Commerce on the social entrepreneur last year. What I said was later synopsised in a Sunday newspaper. The response to what was published showed I was pressing a green button.

I was looking over my experience of several years in the Hospice movement, trying to work out why I had been put out, made intuitively uncomfortable, by the word 'charity'. It was the image of cap in hand, the provoking of pity, the 'spontaneous giving' of 'charity' that discomfited me. You cannot imagine groups who evoke pity coming together to form an identity.

I hoped to create alliances between the voluntary and corporate sectors by bringing about a paradigm shift in corporate perceptions of voluntary organisations. I wanted companies to become pro-active in the pursuit of social goals by identifying and entering into partnership arrangements with socially-entrepreneurial partners. What I overlooked was the fragmentation of the voluntary sector. Partnership when it comes between the three sectors must be at arm's length, between parties sharing burdens and benefits together. An unequal or fragmented partnership cannot be really effective. Before alliances and partnerships can take place in a fruitful way, the voluntary sector needs to find its proper place.

In response to what was published I heard from people in many walks of life who saw in the voluntary sector a vital antidote to materialism, as well as a vital prescription for the post-market era. Most lamented the sector's lack of cohesion. All were united in their passion for voluntarism. They are right, of course.

Ireland's 'Voluntary Sector Directory' (if it existed) would make compelling reading. While market and government sectors are often credited with advances in our society, the voluntary sector has played an essential part in creating our schools, hospitals, hospices, social service and health organisations, clubs, youth organisations, justice and peace groups, conservation and environmental groups, animal welfare organisations, language groups, theatres, orchestras, art galleries, libraries, museums, community development and enterprise schemes, neighbourhood alert systems, and so on. There are thousands of voluntary groups all over the country. What powerful social glue.

Consider what a coming together of the voluntary experience could yield to our society:

- The incubation of new ideas and forums to air social grievances (including 'how work can screw you up')
- The integration and inclusion of persons who would otherwise be excluded
- The provision of a helping hand to the poor
- The preservation of good traditions and values
- New kinds of intellectual experiences
- Practice in the art of democratic participation
- Friendship
- Time and space to explore the spiritual dimension of our lives
- Experience of the pleasures of life and nature.

The structure of the wheel of voluntarism will not be hierarchical. The voluntary sector cannot be trapped or tamed. Those of us who have met so far agree, above all, that all will break bread equally in the new identity. We see equality between groups, big and small, as vital. We see other values too, such as autonomy, diversity and the friendship of networking.

A key word is change. Coming together will mean personal transformation together with community and environmental change. Voluntary groups themselves will benefit from greater cohesiveness, from being in the strongest position to look for and get the 'building bricks' for an infrastructure, for voluntarism, in our legal, tax and education systems, for example. 'Lobbying' will be a different experience. Education and development will benefit everyone involved.

One of my favourite stories is recounted in *Beyond All Pain* by Cicely Saunders. It relates to a patient in a hospice, Enid Hencke, who literally had to fight her way to peace. She found her profound dependence hard to bear. She gradually accepted the reality of what was happening and found the answer, which she dictated the month before she died.

"A friend and I were considering life and its purpose. I said, 'Even with increasing paralysis and loss of speech, I believe there was a purpose for my life.... I was then sure that my present purpose is simply to receive other people's prayers and kindness and to link together all those who are lovingly concerned about me, many of whom are unknown to one



another'. After a while my friend said, 'It must be hard to be the wounded now, when, by nature, you would rather be the Good.'"

It is hard: it would be unbearable were it not for my belief that the wounded man and the Samaritan are inseparable. It was the helplessness of the one that brought out the best in the other and linked them together. If, as my friend suggested, I am cast in the role of the wounded man, I am not unmindful of the modern day counterparts of the Priest and Levite, but I am overwhelmed by the kindness of so many 'Samaritans'. There are those who, like you, have been praying for me for a long time and constantly reassure me of continued interest and support. There are many others who have come into my life - people I would never have met had I not been in need, who are now being asked to take care of me. I like to think that all of us have been linked together for a purpose which will prove a means of blessing to us all.

That story illustrates so well the interconnectedness which is a theme of this conference. In this case between those who are involved in voluntary work, those they care for and the wider community around them. There is but one world in which we will work out our salvation. *Orare est laborare*. *Orare* is not a part-time responsibility.

As we straddle the new millennium we have freedom of choice.

We can influence the direction in which we go. The information society offers wondrous possibilities for creative change. Let finding the proper place and role for the voluntary sector be one of them.

# **CIVIL SOCIETY NEEDS TO BE ANCHORED IN CIVIC REPUBLICANISM**

**Dr. Fergus O’Ferrall**



The important milestone of The Wheel’s 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary provides an opportunity to reflect upon the future of civil society in Ireland. This is especially needed at a time when democracy is in crisis in so many parts of the world. Ireland is not immune to this, with its major democratic deficits, North and South. I suggest that the most urgent need of civil society organisations is to clarify the public philosophy which is required to underpin a flourishing participatory democracy. Only when we embed in our thinking and practices an appropriate philosophy for active citizenship can we be confident that civil society organisations will fulfil their essential roles in Irish society. I am convinced that civic republicanism is the public philosophy that we ought to embrace in order to anchor civil society in a context where it will become central to the well-being of all citizens.

## **What is civic republicanism?**

Civic republicanism as a political philosophy is grounded in the classical republican tradition which originated in

Roman political thinkers like Polybius, Cicero and Livy. The idea of the 'free person' not subject to a master's will and equal to other citizens was central to this tradition. This is a key notion of freedom - freedom from either private or public domination - and it is central to civic republicanism. It implies that each free citizen is adequately resourced and protected by laws made by all citizens against such control or domination. In order to secure this freedom, the laws must be a public affair - a *res publica* - and ought not be controlled by any private interests or power.

This republican conception of the freedom and equality of citizens has continued to inspire actual republics in history however far short they fall below the ideal they espouse. Ireland has been an important exemplar of this republican aspiration, particularly from the eighteenth century, when republican ideals were espoused by many - famously by Theobald Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen. The contest between the republican ideal of freedom as *non-domination* and the classical liberal definition of freedom (and more latterly the neo-liberal definition) has continued right up to this day. Classical liberalism defined freedom as *non-interference* and this became in neo-liberalism freedom for the market to be the main mechanism to determine societal outcomes including people's life chances. In the neo-liberal world order in which we live - one which has led to the current crisis in democracy following the crash of 2008 and to the neo-liberal austerity imposed in its wake - extreme inequalities, great imbalances of power and multiple sites of domination proliferate. The

public realm has been hollowed out and made incapable of addressing adequately the common good in education, health, housing and welfare.

No longer is the republican value of equality, for example, merely rooted in political philosophy. Empirical research has demonstrated the highly destructive personal and social effects of the rising inequalities which characterise so many societies. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's two vital books, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* (2009, 2011) and *The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everyone's Well-being* (2018), place the civic republican value of equality upon a scientific basis and leave no excuse to civil society organisations for silence on inequalities or being co-opted into service provision which salves the consciences of those who support neo-liberal approaches that result in gross inequalities.

Civic republicanism is the public philosophy most appropriate obviously for a society claiming to be a republic. It is based upon the challenging concepts of freedom as non-domination, of active citizenship, of participatory democracy, of solidarity (fraternity), of an equality of conditions to enable freedom and engagement in public affairs to be practicable for all citizens. The philosophy is focussed upon the core concept of the common good. It requires social justice based upon laws which protect a common set of basic liberties and requires that such laws are framed and implemented by government - local, national and international - under a form of public and democratic control that guards against private or public domination.

## **What is civil society and what role should it play?**

When we speak of civil society we may mean just a description of any organisation or movement that is not part of the economic market or of the State. We might also mean the associational practice of citizens combining for to meet some need or purpose not met by commercial or State agencies. We may also speak of civil society to commend norms and values such as active citizenship, the need to diffuse power to citizens themselves and to moral force of citizens seeking to achieve some ends through coming together to give voice to some cause. The Carnegie UK Trust's very valuable *Inquiry into Futures for Civil Society* in 2007 understood civil society in these terms: *associational life, the 'good' society and as arenas for public deliberation*: in summary "civil society is a goal to aim for (a 'good' society), a means to achieve it (associational life), and a framework for engaging with each other about ends and means (arenas for deliberation)".

It is the *normative* meaning of civil society—the concept of the 'good' society—that it is vital to explore and to articulate. When we seek to do this we come quickly to understand that civil society is a necessary and vital underlying structure in the creation and renewal of democracy. My argument is that in the absence of a proper philosophy underpinning the roles played by civil society we will fail to renew our Irish democracy in the twenty-first century. Broadly speaking that renewal must be a major shift toward enriching representative democracy with participatory and deliberative democracy. To facilitate this shift Irish civil society organisations and movements must

themselves be schools of active citizenship and exemplars of deliberative democratic practice. If they so become, they will combat the prevailing neo-liberal view of citizens as merely self-interested actors. Citizens mobilised in civil society organisations are attracted out of such overly privatised lives to create ever-widening circles of critical, informed, participating, altruistic citizens serving public needs and purposes.

### **Civil society and the condition of Ireland**

It is appropriate in this decade of centenaries and as we celebrate twenty years of The Wheel's work in co-ordinating and developing the voluntary sector to reflect on how our present political culture and ideological confusion inhibits a fully flourishing civic republic in Ireland. I have been reflecting on this ever since I was first involved in The Wheel from 1998. I wrote a book on *Citizenship and Public Service Voluntary and Statutory Relationships in Irish Healthcare* (The Adelaide Hospital Society, Dundalgan Press, 2000), dedicated to The Wheel, in which the late Dr. Mary Redmond, founder of The Wheel, wrote a foreword. Here she quoted the Green Paper on *Supporting Voluntary Activity*, published in 1997:

“The rapidly changing economic and social situation in Ireland requires serious consideration on how best to change society in order to make it socially and economically inclusive. There is a need to create a more participatory democracy where *active citizenship* is fostered. *An active voluntary and community sector* contributes to a democratic, pluralist society... [emphases by Dr. Redmond].“

Dr. Redmond noted that these phrases are meaningless “as long as Ireland’s public philosophy legitimating voluntary action is as inadequate as it is”.

In the book, I set out how an impoverished public discourse in Ireland and the resource dependency of many voluntary bodies on the State might be addressed through embracing a civic republican conception of society. Living out such a conception empowers and equips bodies of active citizens to contribute fully to public purposes. It of course requires that the ambivalence in the Irish Republic about our commitment to a civic republican vision of society be addressed. One fruit of the reflection on our emergence as a State before 1922 in this decade of centenaries has been increasing knowledge and awareness of the various forms of radicalism that were on offer in the revolutionary period only to be suppressed in the more suffocating atmosphere of the Free State. It is timely that we seek to recover such social radical themes around workers, feminism, socialism, public welfare, cultural exploration, freedom and equality as we approach the centenary of the State in 2022. At the heart of such radical thinking is the civic republican conception for the free, equal and active citizen in a truly republican society and state.

### **Sources for reflection**

Having counselled the need to understand and embrace civic republicanism as our public philosophy in Ireland I ought to suggest some key sources that will be very helpful in addressing this exciting challenge. I am most indebted to the Irish political philosopher, Philip Pettit, for

his clear articulation of this political tradition and what it might mean today. I was delighted that he has delivered The Wheel's annual lecture; his work is essential reading: *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford, 1997) and *Just Freedom: A Moral Compass for a Complex World* (New York, 2014) are modern classics. Collective inspiration that we may benefit from includes the work of TASC, the independent think-tank dedicated to promoting equality, democracy and sustainability. I was privileged to be editor of *Towards a Flourishing Society* (TASC, 2012) which contains TASC's *A Vision of a Flourishing Society* and my own essay, *Visioning a New Civic Republic and Building a Republican Society and State*, as well as key contributions on the theme of a flourishing society. More recently I was privileged to co-chair The Wheel's People's Conversation on Re-thinking Citizenship. I have learned a great deal from a Coalition of Hope group discussion and process which sought to imagine "a new project of human flourishing" and resulted in the recent book, *A Dialogue of Hope Critical Thinking for Critical Times* (Messenger Publications, Dublin, 2017). Given that the neo-liberal narrative is spent and that an alternative narrative is essential to addressing climate change and our complex democratic crises, the essays in this book are key sources for reflection. My own essay, *Key Areas for Constructive Engagement: Solidarity, Community and Active Citizenship*, invites "thinking big for dark times" and sets out some possible lines of action as we imagine a very different Republic - a 'Civic Republic' - in Ireland. It calls for a stronger civil society voice and an enlarged public sphere through new and well-resourced public



deliberative fora. One of the many very useful sessions that the Coalition of Hope authors had was facilitated by The Wheel to discuss the issues raised.

The benefits of collective reflection by citizens seeking the common good is evident to me, not only through The Wheel, which commenced under Dr. Mary Redmond so successfully with this very methodology, but through the other group reflections in different contexts which I have just noted. The deliberations of the Constitutional Convention and the Citizens Assembly have illustrated beyond doubt the benefits. I suggest that a network of well-funded civic forums ought to be established in every local authority area. Deliberative democracy is key because it has the capacity to produce better policies and decisions, to enhance the legitimacy of decisions and above all to strengthen civic virtues. Citizens learn to listen and have an opportunity to be properly informed and to develop trust as they deliberate together. It is timely now that each civil society organisation studies such key reference books as *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2005 and paperback, 2011) and the excellent overview in *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* (Oxford, 2018), and seek to apply practical and sustainable forms of widespread public deliberation in every locality.

## **Conclusion**

The renewal of our commitment to a genuine republican society and state is an urgent task. The seedbeds of the civic virtues required in such a Civic Republic are sown

in civil society organisations. We must not disdain the hard task of thinking through this together, and building a consensus in society for the principles and values of civic republicanism. As Dr. Redmond reminds us, an inadequate public philosophy renders meaningless our rhetoric about active citizenship and inhibits greatly the potential contribution and roles of all civic society organisations. We face a choice: we may submit to the neo-liberal ideology with its false view of the self-centred human person, or we may empower ourselves to be altruistic shapers of a new participatory society that is flourishing and sustainable. The next twenty years will be determinative of all our futures. Martin Luther King Jr. preached these words:

“History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamour of bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.”

On the evidence of its success in the first twenty years I am confident that The Wheel will play a decisive role in giving a clear voice to the ‘good people’ so that we not only repair and bind up the broken people and communities in Ireland but we ask why they are broken and insist upon building a new Civic Republic - one which will stand for a great and generous experiment in human well-being and happiness. Such a Republic will be founded upon an educated and intellectually-vibrant citizenry, imbued with civic virtues and dedicated to the common good. That is our great task for the next one hundred years of an independent State now formally established as a Republic.

# **A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON CIVIL SOCIETY**

**Dermot McCarthy**



The invitation to contribute to this 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The Wheel prompted reflection on my own involvement with the community and voluntary sector, that part of civil society which has been so well served by The Wheel.

My first formal volunteering experience was in the St Vincent de Paul (SVP) Conference in Synge Street School (where perhaps inevitably I became secretary!). It was an introduction to aspects of life in Dublin which were literally hidden from view. It seemed natural then to join the SVP as a student in Trinity College. It was then becoming, as it remains, the largest student society there. That had a lasting impact on me (in addition to the fact that I met my wife there) in that it gave an edge to my academic study of social policy, and it introduced me to an inner city community which has been an important part of my life ever since. I became involved in developing the Social Service Centre, catering for the needs of the local community. This was an opportunity to work with dynamic and committed people who were motivated by a sense of service and justice to address the needs of their own community, to advocate for what it needed from

public authorities and to convince their neighbours that they could come together to make a difference. It was an introduction to community development and a lasting lesson in the transformative difference of perceiving people as subjects rather than objects in their own life and development.

I joined the Department of Health and continued voluntary work both with the SVP and in Westland Row. I worked on the development of the SVP's first *Statement on Social Policy*. With some trepidation, I was part of the group that presented a copy to the then Taoiseach, Charles Haughey. I recall that, as he flicked through the document without raising his eyes, he said that the idea of the (then) VDP publishing a policy document sent shivers down his spine! Meanwhile, the Social Service Council in Westland Row continued to diversify its range of activities and supported community campaign for the building of social housing in the area. The energy of Social Service Councils around the country, following pioneering examples in Kilkenny, Clare and Sligo, led to the establishment of a National Federation of Social Service Councils, in which I was active. While successful in lobbying for funds to appoint development officers, the Federation's existence was not universally welcome. Ironically, as part of my official work, I was appointed to the National Social Service Board and to the short-lived National Community Development Agency, an experience in travelling both sides of the road.

The work of the Combat Poverty Agency, and the philosophy and approach of the Third European Poverty

Programme were significant influences on thinking and practice in Westland Row, as in many other community organisations. They shaped planning of the St Andrew's Resource Centre, which opened 30 years ago. As Director of the National Economic and Social Council (NESC), and later in the Department of the Taoiseach, this perspective found expression in work on what was an increasing concern: linking economic and social development through a more integrated and strategic approach to public policy. As far back as the establishment of the NESC in 1973, the need to link economic and social progress through the concept of the social wage had been recognised as critical to incomes policies that would support full employment. The social partnership framework adopted in the late 1980s was a more developed version of this, anchored by centralised pay bargaining.

Given the scope of the Partnership Agreements and their impact on wider social provision, the well-argued demand for participation in the process by the Irish National Organisation for the Unemployed became irresistible. A widening of the partnership process through the National Economic and Social Forum was followed in the overall process - though not in the wage bargaining element - through inclusion of the Community and Voluntary Pillar (and later the Environment Pillar). This broadening was not universally welcomed by the existing social partners, nor in government at political and official levels. For some, it raised questions of legitimacy, for others questions of efficiency and practicability. In truth, for some there was a reluctance to accept any dilution of position power and a degree of discomfort

in having to listen to 'unpalatable facts' that challenged established views about national progress and the impact of programmes.

The particular insights of the community and voluntary sector became evident in shaping a successful response to long-term unemployment, which was a legacy of the recession of the 1980s. In the design both of active labour market policies and of locally-tailored programmes in areas of disadvantage, the insights, energy - and impatience - of voluntary groups brought innovation and community resources to what might easily have been left to be solved - or not - in the fullness of time by market demand. Similar resources were drawn on in the response to the needs of areas plagued by heroin, while the broader questions were examined by the Task Force on Active Citizenship.

In time, the complexity of the structures of local development - driven by the requirements of European funding and the inability of the system to confine special measures to areas of disadvantage - led to a centralised drive for rationalisation in the name of cohesion. The sharp end of community development and organisation collided with more established structures and processes. Ultimately, the processes of social dialogue underwent radical transformation.

Looking back, I believe that I was extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity to participate in both the public service and voluntary sector routes to creating social value and progress. Each strengthened the other. I continue to be actively involved in a variety of voluntary

organisations comprising people with diverse talents, differing political and religious affiliations but a shared commitment to making a difference through active social engagement. This has deepened my conviction that this is fundamentally a matter of values: are active citizenship, a vibrant civil society and a flourishing community and voluntary sector of importance in their own right? Do they make for a resilient liberal democracy? I'm convinced that they do, and so merit a strong, consistent and supportive stance from public policy.

That some public policies militate against the flourishing of the sector has been documented by *The Wheel*. Some policy approaches ignore the distinctive features and requirements of the sector, in favour of seeing them simply as agents contracted to deliver services for a public authority, to be evaluated on the same terms as alternative commercial providers in a market framework. Market logic - regarding economies of scale, minimising costs and indicators of performance - are sometimes combined with regulatory processes and penalties which would never be applied to commercial entities. While transparency and accountability must be supported by robust public policies, there would be little sense in pursuing them to the point where voluntary bodies find it difficult to attract board members and compliance costs divert valuable resources into sterile routines.

There is a public interest in sustaining the present situation where people in Ireland are much more likely than those elsewhere to react to social problems by considering what they themselves can do, rather than

leaving it to public agencies alone. Society benefits from a strong sense of engagement that deepens empathy and strengthens communal solidarity. The time, talents and energy of volunteers represent a real resource. The focus, passion and sense of mission within voluntary organisations adds a dynamic to the deployment of tangible resources, adding social capital to financial capital. Both through innovative responses to new needs, and through the deep insights acquired by long engagement with particular needs and communities, voluntary organisations can bring particular strengths to addressing social needs.

I'm convinced, in particular, that community based organisations have a distinctive capacity to act as brokers, integrating services and programmes which otherwise operate within silos that are created by the boundaries of government departments and agencies. Communities and families live joined up lives; voluntary services can be flexible enough to cross barriers and bundle services that mirror this reality.

Positive engagement and smart regulation on the part of public bodies can foster creative partnerships between the public service and the voluntary sector. Irish society would be the poorer if communal life were shaped only by the rules of bureaucracy and the logic of the market. Long may *The Wheel* remind us all of the value - and values - of a vibrant civil society.



# NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US

Justin Kilcullen



“Who elected Oxfam?” This was *The Economist* magazine’s headline in 2004 after the collapse of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations in Cancun, Mexico. They ended in failure and the wealthy northern countries were furious. *The Economist* held that the collapse of the talks was on account of the undue influence of the NGOs, Oxfam included, on the governments of the poorer nations.

This failure began a serious questioning of the role of civil society, including community and voluntary organisations, in political advocacy to advance their causes. Governments saw the sector as self-appointed unelected individuals usurping the power of elected parliamentarians and governments. Was it time to curtail this influence and control the activities of such bodies?

How short are people’s historical memories! What is now conveniently forgotten is that long before governments ever considered it their responsibility to care for their less fortunate citizens, ordinary people were organising themselves into community or charitable groups to help the less fortunate among them.

In 1790, in Dublin, such was the appalling poverty in the north inner city that a group of businessmen

founded The Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers' Society to provide services for the city's poor. You may well know its headquarters, just outside the gates of Dublin Castle. This is reckoned by many to be Ireland's oldest functioning charitable organisation.

Perhaps the earliest record of political advocacy by a faith-based organisation in Ireland was when the Quakers, so angered by the failure of the British government to respond to the famine, shut down their own feeding centres in protest. This so embarrassed the government that they were compelled to act.

Some of the earliest demonstrations of international humanitarian aid were the donations of \$400 by the Choctaw Nation in America, and the three shiploads of food aid sent by the Sultan of Constantinople, to the famine victims in Ireland. And people question today whether Ireland should be sending development aid as times have been so tough!

For centuries, people and communities have been organising themselves into associations and organisations to work for the common good, be it caring for the vulnerable, looking after the sick, organising Meitheals to assist with the harvest, or cooperatives to beat the pernicious middlemen. Not to mention the arts, sports and cultural organisations and their vital work in building a healthy and vibrant society.

All of this work has an even more encompassing purpose: the promotion and protection of human rights. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* calls on all organs of society to strive to promote these "rights

and freedoms by progressive measures to ensure their effective recognition and observance". That is what we are doing when we participate in the work of voluntary organisations all over the country, and it is essential that this is not forgotten.

So when we hear the criticism that there are too many charities, and that there is a need to rationalise the voluntary sector, or reduce the number of aid organisations to eliminate duplication of work, we need to be very careful how we respond. For creating a highly rationalised voluntary sector is likely to kill the immense generosity of spirit that drives so much vital work in the community.

Of course it is important that we have professional standards, that we exercise good governance and that we are good stewards of the funds that the public, through their donations or taxes, entrust to us. But in any rationalisation of our activities we must be careful that there is always room for new initiatives, new groups to emerge and more people to be involved.

When I left Trócaire five years ago, after thirty-two years working there, I retrained as a coach mentor so that I could continue to make a contribution to the sector in a different way. Such work has been really enriching for me. I could see the contrast between a well-resourced charity like Trócaire and the hundreds of small voluntary charities surviving on meagre funds and dependent almost entirely on volunteers. I was amazed at how much could be achieved by these organisations. To be honest I felt a bit of a fraud!

I realised how much easier it is to get things done when you have professional staff to do the work, an annual budget with a certain amount of guaranteed funds, and an experienced board to provide guidance and oversight. I essentially had to retrain myself to think differently about the problems that smaller organisations face.

I have been so impressed by HADD Ireland, which supports people and their families who live with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Such is their commitment to inclusiveness that individuals with the condition must be present on the board and other structures. "Nothing about us without us."

I am impressed by the Irish Haemochromatosis Association. I have this condition myself and so am aware of the amazing work they do on behalf of the thousands of people who are similarly affected, many very severely.

I have had the opportunity to see up front the work of L'Arche in their Kilkenny centre, where their unique approach to care for people with mental disability, living in community with L'Arche volunteers, provides them with a secure and loving environment in which to live their lives.

I have seen organisations run out of people's kitchens, organisations being rescued from difficult circumstances, or just starting out with ambitious plans. What is common to them all is the fierce commitment of those involved and their determination to succeed.

It heightened my awareness and appreciation of the heroic work being done by so many on behalf of us all.

This level of participation of people in the development of our society is essential for our overall health as a nation. It empowers people, promotes societal values, and accelerates social progress. Governments should be pleased to have such an active citizenry and appreciate it as an asset. Alas, in too many places, and increasingly closer to home, even in the EU, such activity is seen as a nuisance or a threat.

Currently I am a Co-Chair of the Civil Society Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE), a global platform that is part of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation established by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation (OECD) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2011 to oversee the effective use of overseas development cooperation. A key role for CPDE in this global partnership is to advocate for an enabling environment for civil society in the development process. This is being undermined by the growing influence of multinational corporations and increasingly oppressive governments seeking to maximise profits from the exploitation of natural resources and cheap labour, amongst other things. Now over a hundred countries have introduced legislation to limit the work of civil society organisations, particularly in the areas of advocacy and human rights. Such measures include controls on the funding of such organisations, particularly from abroad, and limiting their activities to the implementation of government policies without granting them any say in the development of those policies. Those who refuse to accept these conditions are subject to

having their offices raided or their leaders detained, and increasingly in many countries, even assassinated.

Ireland, through its overseas aid programme administered by Irish Aid, is a champion of the role of civil society. Ireland chairs the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva and has recently taken on the chair of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC) Task Team on Civil Society Enabling Environment and Development Effectiveness. This is admirable work.

But are we as 'pure' here at home? The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the UN in 2015, are universal. They apply to all countries, rich as well as poor. They also require a "whole of government" approach. We need to ask ourselves whether our government is being as consistent in its approach to civil society at home as it is overseas. We may not be slipping to the appalling levels of many other countries, some even in the EU, but what is the trend?

Are Irish voluntary and community organisations and charities now increasingly seen as a cheap way to deliver public services? Are civil society organisations really recognised as autonomous development actors, as agreed and affirmed by successive UN forums in the context of the SDGs?

Is there a growing irritation in government departments and semi states with the advocacy efforts of civil society: 'Why should we be funding them just so that they can criticise us'?

While the environment in Ireland for civil society is still relatively benign it is important that we remain

*The Wheel*

vigilant to protect civil society's legitimate rights and roles in a world that is increasingly moving to curtail them.

# **CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS NEED R&D AND COLLABORATION TO INCREASE THEIR IMPACT**

**Dr. Shana Cohen**



Though relatively new to civil society in Ireland, I have worked with charities and NGOs for more than thirty years in a number of countries, including the US, the UK, Egypt, Israel/Palestine, India, Morocco and now Ireland. I have also taught Human Services, or how to design, manage and evaluate the work of charities, in the US and published a number of articles and books on social action in the UK, the US and Morocco. Finally, I have conducted a number of evaluations on national programmes as well as local projects involving a wide range of issues, from job placement to tuberculosis awareness campaigns to interfaith dialogue.

Along the way, but especially since the financial crisis, I have learned three things:

1. Charities possess much more knowledge about the causes of social problems and how to address those problems than they are sometimes given credit for;



2. This knowledge is critical for developing policy and, likewise, highlighting the importance of civil society for social progress. Yet, this knowledge can remain marginalised to policymaking and civil society organisations themselves can be constrained from participating in public debate; and
3. Nonprofit and voluntary sectors increasingly need better working conditions, and particularly conditions suited to their own mission rather than simply replicated from business.

However, constrictions on NGO activities and resources are unfortunately more evident all over the world, as governments identify NGOs as political opposition (see *The State of Civil Society Report 2018* by Civicus). Governments utilise methods like withdrawing or censoring NGO funding, especially if it is public and/or foreign, and publicly associate charitable activities with 'foreign influence', or not being in the 'national interest'. This does not necessarily mean that NGOs and charities close, as they may deliver a necessary social - and thus political - service. As an activist in Azerbaijan isolated because of his work told me, "They won't shut me down because they need the data we produce". But, like him, NGO staff face consistent pressure to limit their advocacy efforts.

The first time I witnessed the vulnerability of social action, despite its potential for innovation and impact, to external funding and institutional pressures was in Washington, D.C. A young director of a mentoring

programme had transformed the activities that supported high school students in a relatively low-income area of the city. Rather than offer straightforward after-school mentoring, the director wanted to establish a network of supporters for each student, especially those whose parents lacked the language skills and sometimes the education to assist with homework or even interact with school staff. In addition, the schools sometimes had trouble with gangs and overstretched resources, producing an environment that could hinder student progress. However, despite the need for the programme, it was quickly shut down by the parent organisation because of the expense, without discussion with the staff or consideration of the impact on the students. Even if the project itself was over-ambitious, the staff had no power to negotiate its continuation.

Faced with financial challenges and sensitive to government and other stakeholder interests, a number of organisations I have encountered over the years in Morocco, the UK and the US have taken another approach. They have offered a well-established service recognisable to funding bodies and thus representing a reliable source of income. Yet, conversations with frontline staff often revealed that the real impact, or sustained change in behaviour and learning, only occurred through complementing these services with informal activities. For instance, literacy courses in Morocco succeeded when organisations offered supplemental courses on top of the government curriculum and focused on the value of reading and numeric literacy to everyday life, like understanding costs while shopping or signs.

At the same time, several national programs that I know well, the Near Neighbours programme in the UK and the National Human Development Initiative in Morocco, have deliberately funded innovative social and cultural projects, awarding relatively small start-up grants and occasional follow-on grants to keep the projects going. These national programmes have run over a number of years with the aim of encouraging civic engagement and, in the case of Near Neighbours, building local relations across groups of different faiths and beliefs. Both programmes were funded by the government, the former in partnership with the Church of England and the latter with the World Bank.

For me, the lesson from these programmes and my experience in the US was that effective social action requires the same sort of research and development funding reserved for technological and other forms of innovation. In many cases, as with the mentoring project in D.C., the fundamental obstacle to social change is that the social problem has been misconceived or defined to appeal to funding bodies and local governments. This misconception or awkward definition can lead to flaws in the service design, as well as in service delivery and evaluation, and even in organisational management of resources. For instance, the director of the mentoring project argued that academic performance could not be improved solely through after-school help with homework; rather, parents, school staff, students and the organisation had to work in tandem to provide the necessary structural support. In other words, the problem was not just class marks, but also lack of advocacy for the students within

the school and at home. However, the proposed approach meant greater investment in staff to support the student and probably fewer students participating in the program. The parent organisation elected not to take the risk or even continue with mentoring, as it was seen as too costly.

I decided to take my current job as the Director of TASC in part because I wanted to be engaged in research that would facilitate better understanding of social issues and how to address them effectively. More specifically, I wanted to be able to help tie together project design, or the theory of change, with implementation, evaluation, organisational and resource management, and political and economic context so that all aspects of social action correspond. In different ways, the financial crisis of 2007 - 2008, the continued effects of austerity measures - which symbolise a narrow vision of capitalism - on low income families and young people, the need to facilitate civic engagement and strengthen civil society organisations, and the power of far-right political movements preying on disaffection and misery have made social action that has real impact an urgent political issue in itself.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Dr. Shana Cohen** is Director of TASC. She studied at Princeton University and at the University of California, Berkeley, where she received a PhD in Sociology. She has taught at George Washington University, the University of Sheffield, and most recently, University of Cambridge, where she is an Affiliated Lecturer and Associate Researcher. Before coming to TASC, she was Deputy Director of the Woolf Institute in Cambridge.

**Deirdre Garvey** is the founding Chief Executive Officer of The Wheel. Her most recent appointments include: the National Volunteering Advisory Group (2019), the Charities Regulator's Advisory Group for the Charities Governance Code (2018), the Strategy Implementation Advisory Group for the National Women's and Girl's Strategy (ongoing), the Charity Regulator's consultative panel on the Regulation of Fundraising (2016), the Working Group on Citizen Engagement in Local Government (2013/2014). Prior to joining The Wheel, Deirdre was Director of Development (Fundraising) at Barretstown in Co. Kildare. She also worked in the private sector, holding several managerial posts in the hi-tech field in Germany.

**Justin Kilcullen** is one of Ireland's most experienced coaches following a long career in international relations and development, and as CEO of one of Ireland's leading charities, Trócaire, for twenty years. He is currently Co-

Chair of the Civil Society Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE), a global platform that is part of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation established by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation (OECD) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

**Dermot McCarthy** is a former Irish civil servant. He served as Secretary General to the Government of Ireland and Secretary General to the Department of the Taoiseach, two of the three most senior offices in the civil service. In 1990, he was appointed director of the National Economic and Social Council (NESCC). As Assistant Secretary General in the Department of the Taoiseach with responsibility for the Economic and Social Policy Division from 1993 to 2000 he played a key role in the Social Partnership agreements of that time.

**Dr. Fergus O’Ferrall** was formerly Adelaide Lecturer in Health Policy in the Department of Public Health and Primary Care, Trinity College, Dublin and previously was Director of the Adelaide Hospital Society. Other positions he has held include Chief Executive of Macra na Feirme, President of the National Youth Council of Ireland, Chairman of The Wheel and Governor of *The Irish Times* Trust. He has written a number of books and articles concerning health policy. Dr. O’Ferrall is also an historian and he has published a number of books on Irish history. In 2015 he was designated Lay Leader of Conference, 2016-18, by the Methodist Church in Ireland.

**Dr. Mary Redmond (1951-2015)** was a lawyer, academic and founder of The Wheel and the Irish Hospice Society. Dr. Redmond completed her law degrees (BCL and LLM) at UCD, and at age 19, she became the first woman to be a lecturer in that university's Law Faculty. She went on to study at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities. In 1981, she was made fellow of Cambridge University (Christ's College), and in 2004 she became Honorary Fellow. In 2014, Trinity College conferred her with an honorary Doctorate in Laws Honoris Causa in recognition of her contribution to legal scholarship and social entrepreneurship.

Civil society organisations are at the forefront of tackling some of the biggest challenges facing Irish society and, indeed, humanity. From housing and homelessness to global inequality and climate change, you will find community and voluntary organisations, charities, social enterprises and NGOs supporting communities and advocating for change.

Inspired by The Wheel's 20th anniversary, this collection of essays, papers and personal reflections explores a variety of perspectives, experiences and issues related to civil society in Ireland and beyond. The authors draw on their own experiences and views to provide a unique snapshot of Ireland's third sector.



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