

In this letter / article I want to respond to some comments made by Gerard Howlin in the Irish Examiner recently:

‘Why try to change an institution that does not need to be fixed’?

<http://www.irishexaminer.com/viewpoints/columnists/gerard-howlin/gerard-howlin-why-try-to-change-an-institution-that-does-not-need-to-be-fixed-465210.html>

An Irish Examiner Abroad – votes for Irish people living outside the State.

I have been campaigning on votes for the Irish Abroad since before the Citizens Convention in 2011, on to the Options Papers produced by the Oireachtas in 2016, and up to the pending referendum on extending the right to vote in presidential elections to Irish people outside the State – Abroad and Northern Ireland, to be held in 2019. This was a decision made by ex-Taoiseach Enda Kenny in Philadelphia last year

Gerard’s main objection seems to be the Irish Abroad numerically ‘swamping’ the Ireland based electorate. I would advise that if previous governments had instigated ‘reserved constituencies’ like most other countries do and the European Parliament in 2016 cautioned Ireland that it was out of step with good practice; we could have full representation pro rata in the Dáil and dealt with the ‘representation and taxation’ . Job done.

Since 2011 the only option on the agenda was votes for the presidency and this is going to be ‘one man/women one vote’. The Options Paper (2016) itself 2.2.1 tackles this head on and says they {Irish citizens abroad} were unlikely to swamp domestic voters if voting follows international trends. It pointed to elections in the UK, Canada and Australia, where large numbers of expatriates are permitted to cast ballots but only a fraction actually do. The paper notes that in the last UK elections there were 263,902 overseas electors out of an estimated overseas population of five million in December 2016. In Canada’s 2015 general election, 15,603 overseas citizens out of an overseas population of two million were registered to vote, but only 11,000 did. In Australia’s 2013

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national elections 455,000 people were registered to vote out of an overseas population of one million. Less than 74,000 actually voted.

The large Irish Diaspora is part of our DNA and if we are the largest diaspora why not embrace it. One hundred years ago we tried to tell women they could not have a vote because 'there are too many of you'. For many emigrants, having the presidential vote will create a deeper dimension to their citizenship, and potentially lead to stronger business relationships, investment, educational links, and deeper cultural and sporting bonds. I would recommend a worldwide Erasmus type programme to build on the already many international exchanges within the Irish diaspora.

So which Irish Citizens should be included in the referendum question? I agree with Enda Kenny TD who, in answer to a question at Liverpool Irish Studies (November 2016) agreed with me; that holding a valid Irish passport should be a qualification for citizens living outside the State to vote in Irish presidential elections from 2025. This meets my concern on equality to include Irish people born outside the State. A passport is tangible proof of Irish identity and that you inherited or sought Irish Citizenship. On a practical level it would make the process of voting and collating easier as you are already accounted for.

I am making an assumption that Gerard Howlin has not lived abroad for any length of time so we may be coming at this from different perspectives and I will certainly not indulge in vituperation. But! a right to vote is more than just a 'numbers game', it is a right, what makes someone a better Irish person, a more equal Irish person because they are living on a part of Ireland surrounded by water and a border of course within the Island?. Furthermore, to become an Irish citizen through naturalisation, with full voting rights in the Oireachtas, Local Government and in Referendums, based on a 'reckonable residency', is achievable well within ten years. Yet to have lived for twenty five years in Ireland and over thirty as an Irish person abroad; but I have yet to be regranted any voting rights. Yet I do not want a vote because I too was born in Ireland, I advocate for any Irish person abroad with a valid Irish passport. Irishness is defined less in territory or geography but by Irish people living out their identity wherever they live.

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In the Ireland I left in 1980 the Irish President then and before were all men, sometimes there was no election as the main parties agreed between themselves an uncontested nomination of an 'elder statesman'; who retired then to Arás an Uachtaráin and attended the All Ireland ! . Imagine my joy over the past twenty eight years as the 'Two Marys' (President Robinson and McAleese) as Uachtaráin na hEireann, highlighted the role of women, the worldwide record of the Irish as humanitarians . Presidents who welcomed the Irish Abroad home, who visited and affirmed the Irish worldwide, who brought Enterprise Ireland on many of their foreign trips and who helped built everlasting bridges between Ireland and Britain? I consider this a good outcome and historic record for two people who stood for election and achieved a lot in an apolitical office. The current Uachtaráin, Michael D Higgins stood against six other candidates, polled over two thirds of the vote and with a larger turn out that the previous general election, and has taken on the mantle , very impressively , the role of president of the Irish nation at home and abroad .

The President represents all the people of Ireland, both at home and abroad. www.president.ie

Gerard reminds us that "The President shall not leave the State during his term of office save with the consent of the Government" for he ensures us that the Government alone controls foreign policy. Are the Irish Abroad not part of foreign policy? I know they are, and one has only to engage with the Global Irish section of the Department of Foreign Affairs to know and experience this.

As regards famous and rich likely to galvanise the Irish abroad vote; bring it on, but give us some credit of discernment. If we bother to register to vote we will be bothered to research and follow campaign. We know the standard expected of our presidents, we meet them maybe more often than the natives. Think back, at the last presidential election Ireland at home nearly elected an Irish tv Dragon's Den star?

I can assure Gerard that the people of Ireland, when asked to put an end to the disenfranchisement of the Irish abroad, will not be found wanting and the referendum, like marriage equality, will not be "dismissed decisively".

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I write a blog on Irish Diaspora issues and the link at the end of this letter gives some relevant background to my campaign.

<https://irelandanditsdiaspora.com/votes-for-the-irish-abroad/>

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