1995

A New Model of Radical Democracy

Ellen Hazelkorn
Technological University Dublin, ellen.hazelkorn@tudublin.ie

A new model of radical democracy

The French and American revolutions signalled the victory of liberal democracy over absolutism, centralism, and unquestioning obedience in the last decades of the eighteenth century. In the twentieth century, marxist notions of class, state, and collectivism challenged liberal democracy's basic tenets. The collapse of 'real existing communism' in the late 1980s has resurrected that debate.

Despite widespread dismissal of Fukyama's assertion that the demise of communism signalled the 'end of [ideological] history', there is little doubt that in some measure he was right. There has been a wave of renewed interest in, and support for, individualism, citizenship, and democracy. It is widely accepted that liberal democracy is the only game in town. Writings by major nineteenth century European and American liberal theorists have been dusted off and new anthologies published. The 'victors' are leaving nothing to chance. Few today would risk political marginalisation by failing to flaunt their 'democratic credentials' - as even Gerry Adams has learnt. Pluralism is central to the new agenda.

Pluralism is the recognition of multiplicity. It is the democratic embrace of diversity, choices, and values which may be individualist, collectivist, and group-centred in nature. It opposes unlimited state sovereignty and the unitary centralised

Pluralism is central to the new political agenda, argues Ellen Hazelkorn

state for two reasons. First, pluralism argues that government must be a neutral arbitrator or mediator between conflictual interest groups and associations in an increasingly complex society. Second, government authority must be checked and limited because it derives from the authority of the people.

But, pluralism is also a paradox. First, its basic assumption that the state is neutral denies or obscures the existence

> *Pluralism argues that government must be a neutral arbitrator or mediator between conflictual interest groups and associations in an increasingly complex society*

of social class or other comparable structural and multifarious rivalries within society. Private economic interests obstruct pluralism. Likewise, corporate and neo-corporate structures, heralded during the 1980s as a means of overcoming interest rivalry by institutionalising them within the decision-making process, raise fundamental questions about which particular interests and who exactly decides.

Second, pluralism tends to reduce democracy to an arithmetical formula of management. Problems are posed by 'active minorities' and 'silent majorities' - a point not lost on the Irish body politic. Without strong coherent government (itself a problematic for pluralism), it is virtually impossible to prevent the 'tyranny of the majority' whether this is in terms of numbers or values.

Third, pluralism sees society as an aggregate of individuals, producing myriad opinions. But is plurality for the sake of it a good thing? Is pluralism equivalent to equality? Can this emphasis on the consensus-forming imperative of government and society lead to sameness or a loss of individualism? According to Marcil-Lacoste (1992), 'the diversity proclaimed by the pluralist is seen by the egalitarian as nothing but a conservation of inequalities'.

Pluralism commanded widespread academic and political support - particularly in the USA during the 'cold
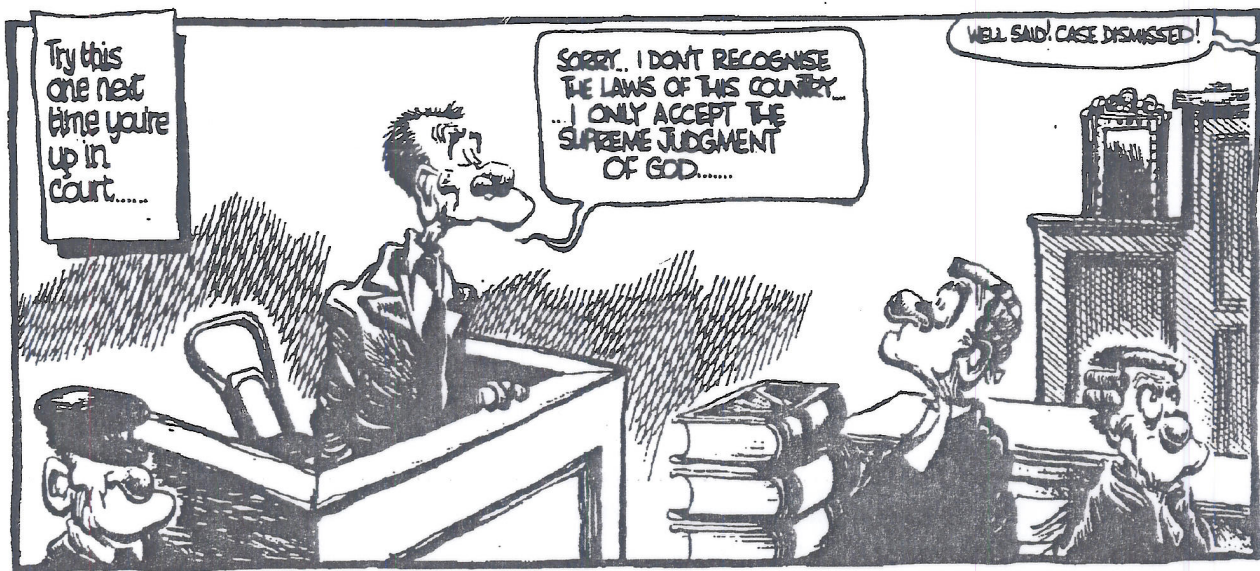
Martyn Turner/Irish Times

war' when its value as a theoretical weapon against 'real existing socialism' became clear. Yet, neither this fact nor its inherent theoretical obstacles should blind us to its important insights, particularly for Ireland.

Irish political and civil society runs counter to any definition of pluralism for two key reasons. First, much has been made of Irish constitutional framers' adoption of the 'Westminster model' of government as indicative of their commitment to the parliamentary tradition and for providing immediate stability for the Irish Free State. Yet, its practice here, as in Britain, has resulted in an extraordinary centralisation of power, equivalent to 'elective despotism' or 'democratic elitism'. Unfortunately, there has been a paucity of critical debate except in the most narrow of terms.

Second, the concept of a 'sovereign state' is compatible with democracy only if the people are homogeneous, have one interest and one will. As society becomes increasingly more complex, this position is inherently implausible. According to Hirst (1989), it annihilates difference and other interests by means of state power. The experiences of both the Republic and Northern Ireland state concur, both having chosen the tyranny and intolerance of monoculturalism in preference to the virtues of multiculturalism.

> ‘ *This absolutism permeates and undermines Irish civil society, replacing citizenship, with its acknowledged rights and responsibilities, with unquestioning obedience to priests and institutions, paralleling clientelist deference to politicians* ’

Irish law and culture reflects the dominant religious values and practices. Like an alchemist, it deliberately and coterminously mixes pre-Enlightenment concepts of natural law with post-Enlightenment ones of natural rights. It elevates the family as the primary and fundamental unit of society, claiming that its rights are 'inalienable and imprescriptible, antecedent and superior to all positive law.' In sharp contrast, the rights of individuals are limited by the state - 'as far as practicable' and 'in accordance with law' - and social function. The latter justifies state-based discrimination according to one's role in society or ability: mother-wife-childbearer vs father-husband-breadwinner.

Most disturbing is the fact that individuals and their rights do not receive the same unqualified guarantees that accrue to family and property. Individuals are either members of families or they are nothing. Indeed, last year's submission on disability by the National Rehabilitation Board suggests that discrimination because of disability may not be unconstitutional. Likewise, the marriage bar is illegal, but not

unconstitutional. It will be intriguing to see how an amendment to remove the ban on divorce can logically proceed without also tackling Article 41.1. Justice O'Hanlon's comments on government deriving 'all powers...under God' exposes once again this game of collective constitutional sorcery.

Much of the Irish constitution's theoretical construct runs counter to the notion of political society 'as the voluntary product of individuals, who decide in mutual agreement [and respect] to live in society and set up government' (Bobbio, 1989). Instead, it endorses a Christian view which is suspicious of the state and its laws, and replaces citizenship with obedience to God and church. Irish citizens have their fundamental rights authorised by God - a pre-enlightenment, paternalistic conception of power.

This absolutism permeates and undermines Irish civil society, replacing citizenship, with its acknowledged rights and responsibilities, with unquestioning obedience to priests and institutions, paralleling clientelist deference to politicians. The confessional state, busying itself with the religious and moral behaviour of its citizens to the extent that it controls opinions, writings, and actions, and restricts dissent, conflicts with the concept that men and women possess rights as human beings independently of being affirmed by the state. '[T]he emancipation of the state from religious affairs' is essential to the extension of democracy from the political to the social sphere because it acknowledges that the 'individual is many-faceted' (Bobbio, 1989).

Failure to pursue both formal and substantive democracy facilitates a slide towards authoritarian statism, particularly in a society like Ireland with a weak civil libertarian tradition. How far a society is willing to defend, protect, and guarantee the rights and diversity of individuals is a key litmus test of democracy.

Michael McGreil's study, Religious Practice and Attitudes in Ireland (1991), is thus a timely reminder of the forces lined up against a radical reappraisal of Irish society. He presents a frightening picture of intolerance and suspicion: 51 per cent would not marry or welcome a Methodist into their families; 60 per cent likewise a Jew; 69 per cent likewise an agnostic; 71 per cent likewise an atheist; 79 per cent likewise a Muslim; and 87 per cent likewise a Hare Krishna. Not surprisingly, Islamic criticism of Salman Rushdie drew no support here, not because the Irish are more committed to literary freedom but because Muslim claims of blasphemy fell outside the ken of Christianity. Similarly, common usage of the word 'foreigner' to describe anyone from tourist to immigrant carries a potent message of exclusion.

Socialists have traditionally rejected concern with individuals and 'rights' as an expression of bourgeois self-interest. But no progress towards the democratisation of society can occur without due recognition of the importance of fundamental liberal tenets. If people are to be free and equal in the determination of the conditions of their own lives and enjoy equal rights as well as equal obligations, then:

1. They must be in a position to enjoy a range of rights (social, economic and political) both in principle and in practice;

2. There must recognition that individuals are multi-faceted, with differing values, moral beliefs and traditions (this is not a denial of religion but rather takes cognisance of its personal nature);

3. There must be specific obligations of citizens towards one another as well as responsibilities of the state to citizens;

4. There must be open availability of information to make informed choices.

To 'empower' people is to provide them with the necessary means to take advantage of opportunities, to defend their rights, and to actively participate. Universal suffrage is no longer a sufficient indicator of democracy.

In the context of the recent debate on abortion and the forthcoming one on divorce (and mindful of the bitter conflicts of the 1980s), it is not surprising that people desirous of society as a true celebration of the incalculable richness of diverse human characteristics, choices and values should propound the virtues of pluralist democracy. We need, however, to widen the debate substantially and map out a radical democracy. Such a proposition requires the incorporation of four key components, the absence of any or all which would threaten democracy:

1. Accountability - placing limits on state sovereignty, including forms of statism and collectivism, particularly when it displays a monopoly of legislative power;

2. Effective participation - placing limits on the concentration of economic power which restricts economic autonomy and undermines equal suffrage;

3. Rights - opposing extreme individualism of free-market liberalism and utilitarian definitions of self-interest;

4. Duties of citizenship - recognising that society is more than an aggregate of self-interested individuals.

Each of these components provides ample scope to draft a comprehensive examination of, and proposals for, a new, radical, democratic, and pluralist Ireland ■