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Yes, It's Equality, But It's Not What It Used To Be

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We are all equal, as long as we are not poor. This is the new equality. The word has stayed the same, but the meaning of "equality" has changed. The language of the political consensus behind the "yes" campaign before last Friday's same-sex marriage referendum was a perfect example.

Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour all framed a "yes" vote as an equality issue. Fine Gael's campaign slogan was "equality for everybody".   Twitter and eBay threw their corporate weight behind the "yes" campaign. Martin Shanahan, chief executive of the IDA, voiced his support. So how was it that political parties and business groups, so often indifferent to inequality, were suddenly the strongest advocates of equality?

The actions of big technology and finance firms meant that support for a "no" vote was never an option for Irish politicians, who would have been accused of harming the country's business reputation. Conversely, parties could claim to support equality with little political sacrifice, since as early as 2012, an opinion poll found more than half of the Irish population was in favour of same-sex marriage. That support was still reflected in opinion polls right up to last weekend.

Furthermore, a blow could be struck for equality with no need for a redistribution of resources through taxation or public spending, which foreign investors would oppose. So Irish politicians managed to look progressive supporting same-sex marriage while, economically, they had little choice.

To understand what has happened in Ireland we need to look abroad. Corporate culture has changed. In 2012, an alliance of 278 companies supported a US Supreme Court challenge to state prohibitions on, and non-recognition of, same-sex marriage. This year, 379 US companies joined a Supreme Court brief in favour of same-sex marriage. The list included Apple, Google and Amazon. The Economist described it as a "who's-who of American capitalism". This included some of the biggest US banks, including those tireless champions of equality Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs.

In their own words, these firms support gay marriage because it is good for business, as well as being the 'right thing to do'. In America, there are different laws on same-sex marriage in different states, which increases companies' administrative overheads by confusing tax and benefit allocations. Firms also say a diverse and inclusive workplace makes for happier and more productive workers, so they can attract and retain the best recruits. By extension of this logic, countries that legislate for same-sex marriage are more likely to attract and retain large corporations.

So big business has shaped how politicians act on this issue. Last March, the state of Indiana attempted to introduce a law protecting religious freedom, which critics saw as a licence to discriminate against gay couples. The corporate backlash was overwhelming. Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, wrote a pointed article in the Washington Post saying he would "oppose this new wave of legislation — wherever it emerges". Angie's List, an online directory, abandoned a planned $40m expansion in Indianapolis. Seattle and San Francisco, both technology hubs, banned publicly-funded travel to Indiana. The bill was changed. The lesson? Technology companies are now willing to use their economic power for political ends.

The Irish economy is heavily dependent on foreign direct investment from multinational firms. Accordingly, Ireland has low corporate taxation and light-touch regulation. The country needs to offer this compelling corporate deal in order to compete with other potential hosts for footloose capital. This used to be restricted to issues tangibly connected to industry such as taxation, infrastructure, and education. However, the behaviour and rhetoric of big business has placed marriage legislation in the arena of competition for foreign investment.

It seems contradictory that companies which often create and even thrive upon economic inequality should be part of an international campaign for legal equality for same-sex couples. This, however, exemplifies the shift in the meaning of the word 'equality'. The problem with the 'free market' version is its wilful blindness to economic inequity. Equality under corporate capitalism is restricted to laudable but limited single-issue struggles that leave the economy be.

Corporate culture has mutated to embrace causes that, until recently, it opposed or ignored. Lisa Duggan, an American writer, has argued that the rhetoric of market-fixated politics shifted in the 1990s towards a superficial inclusivity that was compatible with the global ambitions of US multinationals. This new equality-politics supports diversity and tolerance, but narrowly defines them, in terms that are compatible with big business. For Duggan this is a "stripped-down, non-redistributive form" of equality that accommodates a continued upward redistribution of wealth. So this is the new equality. Only in this diminished sense can Fine Gael, among others, claim to support "equality for everybody".

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