

## CAN IRISH HOSPITALITY WITHSTAND POPULIST XENOPHOBIA?

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*Anti-immigration protests have become a growing concern in Ireland today. Polls show that services and a dramatic housing crisis are the causes, not antipathy to immigration. Traditional ideologies have not evolved well to deal with complex 21st-century realities. Populism offers simple and immediate solutions, but they will fail, exacerbating the situation. Innovative strategies are needed.*

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Ireland should welcome refugees and economic exiles, as Irish people have found refuge abroad for both reasons for many generations. The number of people of Irish descent in the world could be more than 80 million, but the Irish government calculates the official diaspora of Irish-born people and their children as 3 million. The current population of the country is 5.2 million (plus 1.9 million in Northern Ireland), while in the early nineteenth century the population was more than 8 million (when in England it was 10 million). After the Famine of the 1840s the population dropped to 6 million because of starvation, disease and emigration. By 1900 it had fallen to 4 million. So, the country has still not recovered from its demographic loss (by contrast, England has 56 million inhabitants today.) Ireland has one of the **lowest densities of population in Europe** and one of the strongest economies. There is almost no unemployment and a pressing need for workers.

While emigration is still a constant in Irish life, prosperity in recent years has led to net immigration. Twenty per cent of the people now living in Ireland were not born there, twenty-five per cent in the case of the work force. In addition, the number of asylum seekers and refugees has grown. The number of Ukrainian refugees in Ireland has more than doubled the quota originally assigned and has now passed 100,000. At the same time, almost half of the immigrants in Ireland are returned Irish, or British, or EU citizens, all of whom have a legal right to live there. Most new arrivals have work or study visas and **contribute actively to the economy**. So, it is surprising that anti-immigration protests have become a growing concern in Ireland.

In September 2023 a group of hard-core right-wing agitators hijacked a demonstration outside the *Dáil* (Ireland's Parliament), resorting to violence and intimidation against elected representatives and workers. They made a wide variety of demands and complaints, some contradictory, ranging

from lack of housing to rejection of refugees. There was a general feeling of frustration and anger, without a specified target. For many, it was a protest against “the system”, but a minority of agitators using social media took control and turned it into a boycott. There have been a growing number of arson attacks against buildings rumoured to be destined to accommodate migrants. Sooner or later, someone might be killed. In November 2023, a stabbing incident outside a school in Dublin, in which children were stabbed by an attacker who was wrestled to the ground by passersby, was converted into the worst riot in recent Irish history by agitators using social media to encourage people to come armed and ready to do damage. The disturbances descended into looting and vandalism. Ironically, the children, the attacker and the passersby were all immigrants themselves. In December 2023, some neighbours from a village in western Ireland set up vigilante roadblocks because of a rumour that the government was planning to house 150 refugees in the town, but there is also an association of people in the same village dedicated to helping refugees. Protestors in the town of Roscrea criticised plans by the government to convert a bankrupt hotel there into an accommodation centre. There is a sign at the entrance to the village that says, ‘Roscrea is full’. The right-wing social media, backed up by prominent right-wingers in the US, proclaims that ‘Ireland is full’. From an objective point of view, neither Roscrea nor Ireland are full. So, why are such slogans proliferating?

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Outside agitators who tried to infiltrate demonstrations in Roscrea were ejected by the local people, who also brought food and gifts for the refugees and toys for their children, insisting that they were not opposed to migrants. However, they are opposed to government procedures, summarised under the heading of ‘lack of consultation’. There is no organised right-wing party in Ireland, but it is clear that there is a **sense of unease** and frustration among people who are neither hardcore right-wingers nor prone to violence. Neither the government nor the opposition parties have found a way to address this malaise, leaving the field open for agitators to fill the void. Last Christmas a hotel was burned down in Galway. Ironically, a local politician said, ‘there is no room at the inn’, leading Irish bishops to remind people that there had been no room for Joseph and Mary, who also had to flee into exile as refugees. **Mary Robinson**, former President of Ireland, has said, ‘Irish people think there is still room in the inn but need to be properly consulted’.

One way for Irish hospitality to withstand populist xenophobia would be to respond well to the call for consultation. Population growth and immigration have aggravated a dramatic housing crisis. Small towns are depopulated and depressed economically and the accommodation of large numbers of refugees in small towns puts a strain on their resources and services. The hotel in Roscrea was the last place available for weddings

and social gatherings in the area, for instance, and its loss would affect the entire community. There is a serious substratum of social problems that have been festering for a long time.

An innovative strategic approach to bridging the gap between national and local policy, to understanding and responding to the unease and concerns of ordinary citizens, might defeat populists and agitators. In the context of political responses to the climate crisis, **Carles Riba**, former mayor of a Catalan city, has outlined a set of principles that might serve as a starting point for developing 'shared governance'. Better collective decisions could be made by negotiation and agreement between different levels of governments, based on four principles: a) Zygmunt Bauman's principle of hospitality, the moral duty to help all people equally, b) sustainability, sizing populations and activities according to the resources of each place, c) subsidiarity, taking decisions at the levels closest to the citizens affected by them, and d) inviolability, respect for local decisions, as long as these respect established norms. This would require mediation and arbitration systems to resolve conflicts that arise in the realms of electoral processes, fiscal resources, mediation and justice systems, regulation of the media and the use of public order forces.

**Polls show** that many concerns relate to services and capacity, especially in housing: 75 per cent of people said they were concerned that "local services such as health and education could be overwhelmed". Antipathy to immigration is not a major concern. The government now plans to **reinforce community resources** affected by its accommodation policy, but the structure of government in Ireland leaves the lower tiers of local administration particularly weak. Traditional ideologies of right and left have not evolved well to deal with 21st-century realities. Policing and top-down administration cannot solve this crisis. There are no easy solutions to complex problems. The status quo does not respond well to new complexities. Populism offers attractively simple and immediate solutions, but they will fail, exacerbating the situation. We need innovative strategies.