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Sexual politics

# Ireland's victory for marriage equality - the birth of a new political imagination?

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**The Irish electorate's recent resounding "yes" to the question of marriage equality for LGBT people (62% of the electorate, approximately 1.2 million, voted in favour the proposal) briefly turned the international spotlight on Ireland for reasons other than its imploding economic and banking system. Ireland is the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage by popular vote. This is a significant achievement in and of itself, made all the more remarkable by the fact that it occurred in a country that did not decriminalise (male) homosexual activity until 1993 (after it was compelled to by the European Court of Human Rights), and which only legalised divorce in 1995 by the narrowest of margins. The Irish and international media were quick to proclaim the referendum result a victory for the forces of social liberalisation that put Ireland at the "vanguard of social change" and a defeat for the Catholic Church and its once dominant hegemonic position in Irish society.**

It is certainly true that the referendum result was a significant challenge to the historic alliance between church and state, so central to the foundation of the Irish state. The referendum involved an addition to one of the most conservative articles of the Irish Constitution: [Article 41](#) on marriage and the family.

The [Irish Constitution](#) was, and is, a deeply conservative document; a product of a collaboration between the Catholic Church and the State, authored by Ireland's founding patriarchs Eamon de Valera and Archbishop John Charles McQuaid. Marriage enjoys a privileged position in this constitution where a family, exclusively based on heterosexual marriage, is envisaged as such: "[t]he State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded and to protect it against attack."

The family as imagined in these articles is highly gendered with the "special" role of women within the private home also elevated as an ideal: "[t]he State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved." We now know that this vision of the stable "happy" traditional family so beloved by Catholic Ireland rested upon on a brutal religious and state system of containment where women and babies were considered "[little more than a commodity for trade amongst religious orders](#)," with the knowledge and complicity of the State.

The collapse of Catholic hegemony is long in the making; its origins can be located in the revelations of sexual abuse, the Magdalene and religious institutions, and the mother and baby homes. The blame for this painful, [abusive](#) aspect of Irish history cannot be solely located at the gates of the Catholic Church; rather it is intimately woven into the structure of the Irish State, making the recent referendum victory all the more potent. However, the referendum result is notable as something more than an indication of Ireland's social liberalisation and shift away from Catholicism.

Since the economic crisis of 2008, Irish society has experienced a dramatic restructuring of economic life with unprecedented levels of austerity imposed in order to rescue Ireland's banking system and, by extension, the wider project associated with the European Union. The Troika bailout agreement, enthusiastically endorsed by the Irish political establishment, imposed eye-watering levels of austerity that insulated the richest members of society and explicitly targeted the poorest and most vulnerable.

However, in the past year a [significant mass protest movement](#) has emerged, galvanized by the imposition of a deeply unpopular water tax, to fight austerity, producing a political crisis for the Irish establishment. This political crisis is not unique to Ireland; it is evident across Europe where what Tariq Ali describes as the "[extreme centre](#)" is

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facing a moment of crisis as it finds itself increasingly incapable of responding to the needs and desires of the people of Europe.

In his Prison Notebooks, Antonio Gramsci reminds us that “the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” The victory for same-sex marriage in Ireland should be understood as part of this interregnum. The old is dying in Ireland but what will replace it remains up for grabs.

Certainly, the political establishment is keen to impose not simply the economic but also the ideological logic of neoliberalism. As a political objective, same-sex marriage sits comfortable with prevailing neoliberal ideology. The model gay and lesbian couple projected by Yes campaigners bears a striking resemblance to the ideal neoliberal citizen.

In the weeks coming up to referendum every second person you encountered seemed to be wearing a badge that said “Yes Equality.” Posters produced by the Labour Party were emblazoned on every second lamppost with the slogan: “[Vote Yes! Let’s treat everyone equally.](#)”

In a country that spectacularly fails to treat large sections of the population in a manner that resembles even the most conservative conception of equality, this would be laughable if the reality was not so horrific: asylum seekers fleeing torture, poverty, and persecution are left to languish in the notorious [direct provision system](#) for years; women are denied access to even [basic bodily autonomy](#) when pregnant; and the entire political and economic establishment has recently gone into overdrive to ensure an insurmountable level of economic inequality.

Yet, the idea of “Yes Equality” captured the political imagination of the current moment in Ireland and those who have disproportionality suffered as a result of austerity “€” young people and people living in working class communities “€” were the strongest and most enthusiastic supporters of the referendum.

This suggests that there is a real opportunity to build an alternative to neoliberal logic and to construct a more inclusive and emancipatory notion of equality.

[Public Seminar](#)