

Emigrant Manifesto

A Voice for the Irish Abroad



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Introduction

The 2016 General Election comes at a pivotal moment in Irish history. As the country emerges from the economic crash, on the eve of the centenary of the Proclamation, the outcomes of this election will determine the arc of our national progress into its second century.

Yet a large section of Irish people are being denied any say in these decisions. One in six Irish citizens now live abroad - the highest proportion of any developed nation. Ireland, unlike over 120 other countries, does not allow these citizens to vote. As a result the causes and consequences of repeated cycles of mass emigration have not been adequately addressed by successive cohorts of politicians.

The Irish State and individual citizens can have much to gain from the positive experience of migration. But for many, their experience of economic or social marginalisation in Ireland has been followed by geographic and political exclusion abroad. Those who have left but would like to return face significant barriers.

With the latest wave of emigration that accompanied the financial crisis, the ethical responsibility of the Irish State to its overseas citizens has never been greater. Any new Government must commit the Irish state to a new deal for the Irish abroad.

Consultation

The recommendations in the EmigrantManifesto are based on the findings of an online survey as well as a series of focus groups and interviews carried out with individual emigrants and representative groups and services. [1]

Highlights of the research include:

- Consistent with other consultations, the research found a strong desire among the Irish overseas for the right to vote with 87% of respondents in favour of votes in the general election.
- The survey also showed the Irish abroad to be keenly interested and connected to home with 77% regularly keeping up to date with current affairs, reading Irish newspapers (68%) or visiting Irish websites (69%).
- Only 16% of respondents agreed that the Government provided adequate support to emigrants overseas, while 71% disagreed that the Government was doing its best to tackle the causes of emigration.
- Housing (53%) and employment (63%) were the main barriers anticipated by those respondents wishing to return home, though nearly one-in-three (31%) were concerned about social and cultural adjustment.

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A New Deal for the Irish Abroad

Representation

“Allowing for the participating of Irish emigrants in domestic electoral process would reinforce their attachment to Ireland, would bolster the linkages that Ireland has been successfully building over the years and would make a positive contribution to emigrant’s well-being.” OECD 2015

Internationally the OECD and EU have criticised Ireland for disenfranchising its overseas voters. At home, despite strong endorsement of increased voting rights by the 5th report of the Constitutional Convention, the Government failed to act citing “practical and operational challenges”. Such challenges have been surmounted by over 120 other countries leaving Ireland out of step with most comparable democracies.

The incoming Government must respond more proactively to this issue, follow international best practice and listen to public demand to modernise Ireland’s voting system and grant voting rights to emigrants. This should include the following in entirety:

An electoral commission to modernise the absentee ballot process

This should be established by the Department of Environment, and emigrant groups should have representation on the commission (This would also benefit resident citizens travelling abroad on polling days).

A referendum on emigrant voting in time for the next presidential elections

A date should be set for a referendum proposed by the Constitutional Convention and draft legislation should be published that would enable overseas and Northern Ireland voters to participate in presidential elections.

A commission to explore the right of all citizens to vote

A commission should be established in 2016 to explore the right of all citizens to vote on future constitutional referendums and the creation of a 5-seat ‘Overseas Constituency’ with a report released by the end of 2017.

A voice for Irish citizens abroad in a reformed Seanad

The recommendations of the Seanad Reform Working Group should be realised by extending the vote to citizens abroad [not only graduates] and ensuring representation in the chamber.

“They should stop treating us like a cash cow and start recognising us as citizens.”

Survey response

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Reform

“Our vision is a vibrant diverse global Irish community, connected to Ireland and to each other”
Ireland’s Diaspora Strategy 2015

The ambition of the Government’s diaspora strategy has not been matched with the required level of action. Recognising the reality of emigration in a globalised world, the incoming government must undertake reforms to maximise the benefits and meet the challenges of Ireland’s emigration profile. This must recognise the diverse nature of the Irish overseas population and the greater connectedness - through technology and travel - associated with emigration in the 21st century.

A Whole-of-Government Approach

The post of Minister for Diaspora Affairs should be retained and expanded, attending Cabinet and chairing a sub-committee bringing together Ministers of relevant departments. This committee should be responsible for mainstreaming and proofing all relevant policy and legislation for its impact on the Irish abroad.

An Irish Emigrant Register

A voluntary register would act as a connecting mechanism between the Irish State and its citizens abroad. In time this should be linked to the overseas voting register. In order to meet the demands for greater engagement from the Irish abroad, this would be supplemented by a greater investment in an expanded and more proactive online hub providing not just static information but including opportunities to engage with Ireland, webinars, resources and “How To” guides. There should be further support for offline communications and outreach such as long wave broadcasting services.

Expansion of the Emigrant Support Programme (ESP)

While the ESP currently focuses on emigrant welfare while abroad, evidence has shown that there is a need for greater support for emigrants pre-departure and to facilitate return. The ESP portfolio should be reviewed to ensure the right balance of support is in place across the emigration cycle, building in examples of best practice (such as the Irish Australia Chamber of Commerce ‘Returning Migrant’s Programme’).

A Focus on Wellbeing

Beyond their economic impact, large emigration flows can have a significant impact on individual and community wellbeing. Evidence shows that parents can experience reduced happiness and mental wellbeing as a result of the emigration of their offspring while those who have left can lack appropriate culturally relative support structures. Dedicated programmes like the Helplinks Support Service ‘Cabhrú’ should be supported and expanded.

Emigrant Bonds

These reforms will require extra resources. The Government should trial an ‘Emigrant Bond’ scheme building on experience with the National Solidarity Bond and the Immigrant Investor Bond. Finance should be ring-fenced for spending on emigrant support and targeted skills and training programmes to build a workforce to attract jobs and investment.

“All I really care is that there is some real - not just verbal - recognition of those of us who felt they had to leave. It’s not easy leaving your family friends and country.”

Survey response

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Return

The call to return has rung hollow for many emigrants. Campaigns like #hometowork have ignored the resentment that many feel at having had to leave and make no reference to the many barriers to return that exist. They equally exclude older generations no longer in work and with fewer connections to home. Those who do decide to return will face the same challenges as residents, and there is no case being made for special provisions or preference. However, returning emigrants will face a series of issues unique to their situation that the Government must address.

A 'One-Stop Shop' for Returning Emigrants

Accessing this information and navigating the bureaucracy of returning was the most common complaint among those canvassed. A comprehensive information, advocacy and referral service is required, expanding on existing services like the Crosscare Migrant Project and Citizens Information Centres. This should be implemented by a dedicated cross-departmental team with enhanced training and cooperation and a mandate to streamline the process for returning emigrants and address issues such as transfer of health insurance and pension rights.

Preparation

With the expansion of the ESP, Government should increase support for initiatives and programmes in host countries aimed at helping returning emigrants to prepare and readjust to living in Ireland. Participation in such programmes should be recognised by the Department of Social Protection as supporting the satisfaction of Habitual Residency requirements.

Education

A variety of educational barriers to return were highlighted in the research. For those returning to raise a family more choice in non-denominational schools is required. Additionally, university fees should not be greater for children of returning emigrants. Those returning for employment face challenges in the recognition of qualifications so the next government should extend the use of the National Framework Qualifications for professional accreditation and support EU measures for common professional qualifications.

Housing

While Ireland is in the midst of a housing crisis, increased numbers of returning emigrants will add further pressure and this must be factored into the next Government's housing strategy. The rental sector will be key to meeting these demands. An efficient rental market with greater supply, better enforced quality standards and more secure tenancy rights would make return more attractive for some cohorts.

“If the Irish government want people to return then they need to make it easier for them to get started.”

Survey response

[1] The survey had 159 respondents and was conducted across December 2015 - January 2016. Among those organisations consulted on the manifesto were The Crosscare Migrant Project; Irish Business Network Berlin; Irish Australia Chamber of Commerce; The London Irish Centre; Votingrights.ie; Votes for Irish Citizens Abroad Campaign.

The manifesto was reviewed by Dr Piaras MacEinri, UCC, joint author of the 2013 Emigre Report. The findings of the survey conducted for the EmigrantManifesto are consistent with the 2013 research which had a sample size of 1500