



Constitutional Conversations, No. 4 of 6

The Idea of a Republic: Freedom and Politics

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Report by rapporteur Fionn McGrath

The preamble to Bunreacht na hÉireann asserts a connection between concern for the common good and the dignity and freedom of each individual. It can be argued that this connection is the distinctive mark of the republican model of politics, impacting on the republican idea of citizenship and law. However, in the contemporary neo-liberal world, which emphasises freedom as individual opportunity, freedom and the common good seem to be incompatible.

This report summarises the fourth 2016 Constitutional Conversation, which focused on Bunreacht na hÉireann's preamble. It considered the connection between individual and collective freedom, addressing the questions of whether these notions of freedom are conflicting and, if not, how we might find new ways of making sense of the republican idea that we flourish as individuals only when all of us flourish within the framework of a legally regulated, political association.

Panellists offered a number of proposals for how best to understand and characterise ideas such as dignity and the common good and to relate them to the broader ideas of freedom, politics and republicanism. An initial concern was how to understand the idea of a republic, and in particular whether the meaning of such ideas is tied to specific historical, cultural and social contexts. The word 'poblacht' speaks in favour of this view, for there is no direct translation



in English, suggesting that the framers of the 1937 constitution had a highly specific idea of what a republic is. However, it was pointed out in response that the translation difficulty gave birth to a neologism, 'peopledom', which reaches beyond the context in which it was originally forged. Furthermore, it was suggested that this word creation indicates the importance of the imagination and creativity in the fashioning of a republic; poetry has the potential to play an important role in the process of envisioning alternative notions of republicanism. The poetic figure of the 'metic', the foreigner who is denied citizen rights in her place of residence, was invoked as a way of capturing the spirit of republicanism – the inhabitant of the political association who is both at home and not at home and is engaged in public life nonetheless.

Also discussed were challenges arising from Ireland's globalised economy; this not only presents legal and bureaucratic problems but together with the mass media it encourages low-energy democracy and blinkered vision. Here, too, we may need the imagination in order to reverse the trend. Failures of imagination are evident not only in the inferiority complex Irish politicians display when confronted with economic arguments, but also, for example, in the Dáil's mirroring of the British parliament. A more imaginative approach to questions of freedom and republicanism could help us to recognise the law's fluid, processual nature rather than viewing it as something which is set in stone.

This reinvigoration of the political imagination is to be achieved through art and education. Socio-economic progress, too, requires artists and originality. However, the politicisation of art and poetry must be avoided; rather they must be integrated into our institutions and our ways of life: in particular, into our educational institutions and practices, where we must encourage self-directed learning and foster critical thinking. The Leaving Certificate, with its emphasis on 'points' and memory, is a factory model of education, which must be replaced not simply for reasons of ideology but in order to encourage good economic growth, as the skills it instils are increasingly redundant in the contemporary global context.

The concluding part of the panel discussion focused on the relationship between the ideas of a republic and the common good. At this point the initial view that such ideas have meaning only in highly specific historical contexts was directly challenged. The counter-argument was made that such ideas are aspirational and always retain a certain distance from the actual practice of politics (Jefferson maintained that ideas have a life of their own). It was claimed, furthermore, that freedom is not a natural property but develops in part through engagement in political processes. This implies that the state contributes to the full development of freedom and hence must protect the development of freedom legally. Conversely, freedom in the sense of collective self-determination enables us to create new ideas of the common good through engagement in political processes. We must see notions of freedom and the common good, then, not as fixed but as fluid ideas, and appreciate the dynamic nature of republicanism.

The subsequent open discussion thematised the apparent dissonance between universal and particular understandings of concepts such as freedom and republicanism. In addition, worries were expressed that the free market was wrongly seen to be diametrically opposed to ideas of freedom and the common good. The case was made for viewing the market, too, as a fundamentally dynamic concept. Other topics discussed included the importance of dignity and prudence and their place within a republican framework. Here too it was suggested that art and the imagination might help us to understand the meaning and political relevance of these ideas.

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Panellists: Richard Bourke, Department of History, Queen Mary University of London
Mark Patrick Hederman, Abbot of Glenstal Abbey
Iseult Honohan MRIA, School of Politics and International Relations, UCD
Nerys Williams, School of English, UCD

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