

Return from exile for the children of the Shamrock

With a growth rate of nearly 6% this year, Ireland is displaying a dynamism that is the envy of its European neighbours. Despite the obstacles, thousands of Irish who fled green Erin during the crisis, are beginning to return home.

"Go back to Ireland? Never!" For seven years Nicky Griffin had dream jobs all over Europe. Consultant in a publishing house in Switzerland. Media consultant for Google in Hamburg, Germany. Translator of bestsellers for Harper-Collins, American editing giant in Madrid. *"Before, I was convinced I would never set foot again in my home country, ravaged by the crisis"* confides this Irishwoman with a determined look.

It was a few months ago during a visit to her sister in Dublin when something changed her mind. *"There was a wave of optimism in the city, I barely recognised it"*, she recounts. The pubs are full again. On the "Silicon docks", the once dilapidated quayside where, following the lead of Google and Facebook, Airbnb has just set up its European headquarters, all languages are now being spoken. New job offers fill recruitment agency windows. So, Nicky Griffin came back. Today, she is a manager for LinkedIn. And she has just bought a new house. *"A house!"* she repeats with enthusiasm, *"if someone had told me five years ago (that I would buy a house) I wouldn't have believed it"*. Like Nicky Griffin, thousands of young Irish people who left their country during the crisis are now thinking of making the reverse journey. It must be said that in the last couple of months the Emerald Isle is displaying a dynamism that is making all western countries green with envy. Following the housing crash and the 2009 recession (-5.6%), GDP has grown 5.2% in 2014 and will reach 6% this year according to the European Commission. A European record. And the rate of unemployment, which hit 15% in 2012, continues to fall. In October it was 8.9% according to figures released on the 1st of December by Eurostat, the European office of statistics.

"The pace of the recovery is surprising" comments Alan Barrett, director of the Economic and Social Research Institute in Dublin. According to him, it concerns not only the large multinational companies in the country profiting from low corporate tax rates (12.5%). *"At first driven by exports, today growth is spread through the whole economy"* acknowledges Richard Bruton, the Minister for Jobs. His Government, a coalition between Fine Gael (centre right) and the Labour party, has set itself the goal of full-employment, in order to end the wave of emigration. *"The skills shortage is already being felt in some sectors like new technologies: we need these young people to come back"* explains Mr. Bruton.

This contrasts with the distress which pervaded the country after the shock of 2008. *"It was terrible, sudden, there was no hope for my generation"*, recalls Shane O'Callaghan, 27. After gaining a Bachelors degree in Business in Cork, the second city of Ireland, this young sporty man decided to leave for London. Just like Anna Ward, a law graduate, who packed her bags for Sydney after having sent out hundreds of CVs in Dublin. In vain. *"I boarded the plane with bitterness: I didn't want to go"* says this shy pretty blonde, recently returned. In Australia she found a job in a major firm in a few days.

The Irish did not discover emigration with the financial crisis, it is consubstantial with the history of the country of Samuel Beckett. *"It is almost part of our DNA"*, explains Mr. Barrett. The Great Famine of 1845 sparked an unprecedented wave of emigration: within ten years, Ireland lost one

quarter of its population (from 8 to 6 million). It then fell to 4.4 million in 1911. Ever since, it has been increasing and decreasing depending on the economic situation, each recession creating a new wave of emigration, and almost every decade: 1950's, 60's, 70's, 80's... and then 2008.

Ministry of the Diaspora

Over the past seven years, 260,000 Irish citizens left the country, which now has 4.6 million inhabitants. Most left for London, New York, Canada or Australia. *'Whereas they were poorly qualified in the past, emigrants are, since the 1980's, among the most highly qualified of the population'*, explains Mary Gilmartin, a specialist in migration from Maynooth University, west of Dublin. For now, only a slight wave of returns has been noted – 12,100 Irish people came back between April 2014 and April 2015, which is 4.3% more than the year before. But according to economists, the trend has been accelerating over the past few weeks. The government thinks it will increase in scale in 2016, and hopes that the country will progressively return to full-employment in 2018.

To help accelerate things, the country is working overtime. The Government created a Ministry of the Diaspora in 2014, in order to maintain the link with the numerous Irish communities scattered around the globe. Recruitment agencies regularly send envoys to Melbourne, London or Toronto on a regular basis to attract people back to Ireland. Finally, Enterprise Ireland, the governmental agency in charge of developing SMEs, rolls out the red carpet for those who come back to start their own business.

Lack of Recognition

The case of Brian and Rachel Nolan. After several years in New York – him in Finance, her in publishing – this couple of thirtysomethings moved back to Dublin, a mad scheme on the cards: to create ice cream without milk or gluten. For six months Enterprise Ireland provided them with coaching, meetings with investors and help with their business plan. *"Without this helping hand, nothing would have been possible"* confides Brian. Today, their brand of ice cream, Nobó, is sold all over the world.

Even though they commend this type of support, economists and demographers are more sceptical about its effectiveness. *"There remain many barriers to return"*, emphasises Marie-Claire McAleer, researcher for the National Youth Council of Ireland, an organisation representing the young. For example, according to her, a lack of recognition for experience gained abroad, poor quality infrastructure in transport and health, not to mention the shortage of housing in Dublin. *"Unfortunately, the buildings which sprung up during the pre-crisis building boom were built in the wrong places, too far from the city centre and did not meet the needs of the population"*, regrets Fergal O'Brien, chief economist of IBEC, the Irish MEDEF.

All the same, the motivations to return are more complex than a simple desire to profit from the economic recovery. In effect, many of those who left during the recession are now in their thirties. The age when one thinks about starting a family. And when one chooses an ideal place for this endeavour. *"I wanted my children to grow up in Dublin so that we would share the same cultural roots"* explains Niamh Bushnell who returned from New York in 2014. *"In the Irish language, we call this 'tír ghrá' – the love of country, and this is what pushes us to return"* confirms Neasa Bheilbigh, teacher. After six years in London, then in Halifax Canada, she and her husband Neil chose to move

back to be near their families. *"We earned better money across the Atlantic, but with age, priorities change"* she confides. All while emphasising that the return home is not always easy.

Despite the recovery, there are still many signs of the legacy left by the crisis which began with the explosion of inequalities. And the unemployment rate is still high in small towns. *"For some, the return can be more difficult than the departure, because they have idealised the Ireland that they left"* explains Ciara Kenny, a journalist specialising in the subject (of emigration) for the Irish Times. The island they rediscover bears scant resemblance to their memories. *"Their former friends have left, or are little interested in the lives they have led abroad, this can be destabilising"*. Still full of joy at being newly-returned, Helen McHugh, an assistant manager who lived in Australia for three and a half years until last September, has sometimes been confused by the attitude of her loved ones. *"Very quickly, they behaved as if I had never left, even though I am no longer the same"* she says. But she does not regret coming back. Because apart from her family, one thing she missed more than anything else while she lived under the Sydney sun: the Irish sense of humour. *"The Australians didn't understand my jokes: how tiring"* she smiles. *"That's all, isn't that a good enough reason to come home?"*

Embassy of Ireland

Paris

2 Dec 2015