

Global Irish Civic Forum Report

Irish Abroad Unit,
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
& UCD Clinton Institute

Dublin, 3rd – 4th June, 2015

The inaugural **Global Irish Civic Forum** was held at Dublin Castle on 3rd and 4th of June 2015. It brought together over 200 participants from 17 countries, representing 140 organisations dedicated to supporting the Irish diaspora around the world. The event, which was signposted in *Global Irish: Ireland's Diaspora Policy*, published in March this year, is a significant illustration of the evolving relationships between state and diaspora and within the global Irish diaspora itself. It represents a mature form of diaspora engagement that reflects both the state's commitment to dialogue with the diaspora and the collective energies and good will of diverse diaspora actors in advancing this dialogue. Many participants were keen to explore the possibilities of a civic forum, giving voice to diverse constituencies and perspectives, committed to open dialogue, and representing a pluralistic vision of the Irish diaspora.

Jimmy Deenihan, Minister for Diaspora Affairs, set the tone for the Forum in his opening address. Referring to the state/diaspora relationship as a “conversation” he noted that this involved “a listening and learning process” for government and “a policy-shaping process” for the diaspora. He ended his speech with a note that all issues should “be open” to discussion at the Forum. Charles Flanagan, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, echoed this in his address to the Forum on the morning of 4th June. He remarked on the promise of a post-referendum Ireland that is “a more pluralist, a more tolerant, and a more equal state,” and added: “We want our people home.”

This report provides précis comments on the Forum workshops and panels and concludes with commentary on the import and potential outcomes of the Forum¹.



Minister Jimmy Deenihan T.D, Jennie McShannon (Irish in Britain) and Minister Charles Flanagan T.D



Presentation at the Global Irish Civic Forum

PANELS

There were five panels on thematic issues.

1. Challenges Facing New Irish Emigrants

This panel, moderated by Tim O'Connor, involved Sinead Crowley (Irish International Business Network), Joe Thompson (Irish Australian Support Association, Queensland), Cathy Murphy (Irish Canadian Immigration

Center), Stephen Aherne (Irish Outreach San Diego), and contributors via video link from Abu Dhabi. Issues discussed included: challenges for new emigrants to Australia where there is evidence mental health issues are fed by loneliness and isolation; the needs of new Irish emigrants across Canada, including skills recognition and certification and the limitations of certain forms of work permit; the lack of a clear road to long term residency in the United States, the general lack of

Full recordings of the addresses and panels are available at <https://www.dfa.ie/global-irish/support-and-services/global-irish-civic-forum/>. There were also stand-alone presentations by Kingsley Aikins (Diaspora Matters) on networking and diaspora engagement and by John Cocannon (Ireland 2016) on plans for the centenary programme to commemorate 1916.



preparedness for life in the US, including knowledge about social norms and lack of welfare support, and in particular the lack of a professional outlook among J1s; and the suggestion that third level institutions in Ireland could do more to prepare student emigrants for life and work abroad. There were many questions and comments from the floor. Several speakers suggested more could be done pre-departure to prepare emigrants though some also noted that there was a great deal of information already available and the task is to get the attention of potential emigrants before they leave - there was a suggestion that departees could learn from those who have returned. Speakers representing Home to Vote pressed the need to discuss and promote voting rights for Irish emigrants, a sentiment widely welcomed within the audience. There were comments on the challenges of working with diversity and the “disconnects” within diaspora communities between “old” and “new” arrivals, which led to comments on the role of Irish culture (and the GAA) as a bridging, communicative force, reaching second and third generations.

2. Irish Identity and Heritage

This panel, moderated by Steve Lenox (Irish Network USA), included Patrick Morrison (Comhaltas UK), Paraic Duffy (GAA), Niamh Hamill (Drew University), Gerard Mulligan (Ireland Japan Chamber of Commerce), and Nancy Wormington (Irish Cultural Center, Kansas). It raised matters of identity across a range of sectors and geographies. It included: commentary on the duality of identity for many of the Irish in Britain and the different ways in which older and newer generations engage Irish community; the role of the GAA, which has 20% of its clubs abroad, and has a growing sense of responsibility about its role as a supportive network for Irish communities abroad; misconceptions of each other by Irish and Irish-Americans and the need for education to address this, especially as study abroad is fast growing in the United States; perceptions of the Irish in Japan; and the role of Irish culture as a point of first contact that builds connections. The speakers from the floor asked how civil society groups can support diversity and commented on Irish settlement in New Orleans and on the role of culture and heritage in helping to maintain emigrant's health and community.

3. Reaching Out to Irish Citizens Abroad

Jennie McShannon, Irish in Britain, moderated this panel, which included Celine Kennelly (Irish Immigration Pastoral Center, San Francisco), Marion O'Hagan (Australian Irish Welfare Bureau), Denise Flanagan (Honorary Vice Consul, Auckland), Joe O'Brien (Crosscare) and contributors via video link from London. Jennie McShannon began by asking the audience for words they associated with Irish citizens abroad - the broad range of replies aptly illustrated the plurality of these identifications. She then spoke of the meaning and role of civil society, a community linked by common interests and collective experience, dedicated to expanding and deepening representation, building bilateral links, and testing assumptions. Panellists discussed the challenges of “reaching out,” the need to build partnerships and networks between the state and the Irish diaspora, and the distinct roles and

responsibilities of the agents in this communication. There was an emphasis on the need to “plan for the long term” and ensure the “diaspora-proofing of policies” within government. From the floor, there were comments on education - that the “new Ireland” needs to learn about the Irish diaspora and also about “other diasporas” in Irelands - and on the care and respect required so that the diaspora is not positioned or perceived as a “resource to be harnessed.”



L to R: Minister Jimmy Deenihan T.D., Michael McLoughlin (Connect Ireland), Ciara Kenny (Generation Emigration, Irish Times), Andrea Pappin (All About Jobs Campaign Co-ordinator)

4. Supporting the Mental Well-Being of Irish Emigrants

This panel, moderated by Mike Carroll (Council for American Ireland Relations), included Joan Freeman (Pieta House), Claire Barry (Mind Yourself), Sally Mulready (Irish Elderly Advice Network), Yvonne McNamara (The Traveller Movement UK), and contributors via video link from Ottawa. It sparked discussion on one of the most pressing issues that emerged across the Forum, the mental health of emigrants. Panellists representing frontline organisations spoke about: the creation of a Pieta House facility in collaboration with New York Irish Center; the relationship between identity and well-being as a crucial component of Irish welfare in the diaspora - an example mentioned was the significance for the older generation in the UK of improving mental health via cultural activities; the multiple health challenges facing Travellers in Britain, as well as ongoing discriminations - there was a suggestion that what was once anti-Irish feeling in Britain is now anti-Traveller. From the floor, speakers offered examples of mental health challenges and the relationship between poverty and mental health was underscored. Several speakers focused on dangers of exclusion in the discussion, noting the paucity of commentary on race and LGBT representation. In his concluding remarks, Minister Deenihan, noted that “Irish policy is evolving and can only do so in step with the people here.”

5. Assisting Emigrants Returning to Ireland

This session began with moving comment by the moderator Marty Kavanagh (Honorary Consul in Western Australia) on looking forward to marrying his partner in post-referendum Ireland. The panellists included Minister Jimmy Deenihan T.D. (Minister for Diaspora Affairs), Michael McLoughlin (Connect Ireland), Ciara Kenny (Irish Times), Andrea Pappin (All About Jobs) and contributors via video link from Sydney. Panelists spoke to several examples of initiatives to

support returnees, including the Global Irish hub and Connect Ireland, and commented on a range of issues that deter people from returning. From the floor, several speakers stressed that the government focus on jobs in this session was welcome but limiting as there are many obstacles deterring emigrants from returning to Ireland, including residency tests and other matters of access to welfare, housing, health care and pensions, recognition of health insurance cover and of driving licences. Speakers also asked if more could be done to advise J1 students returning to Ireland and looking for employment, many bringing back valuable skills and experiences. A speaker remarked that “Welcome back” must include all who want to come back, not only the employed. Minister Deenihan noted that matters of return require a whole-of-government approach and that the Inter-Departmental Committee on Diaspora Policy can help facilitate this.



Marty Kavanagh (Honorary Consul, Western Australia)

WORKSHOPS

There were three workshops on practical matters:

1. Fundraising

The chief facilitator of this session was Siobhan Lyons of the Irish Immigration Center in Philadelphia. The workshop was made up of representatives of organisations with diverse sources of funding, different fundraising goals, and a variety of capacities, from fully voluntary to full professional teams. Issues of capacity and resource were the common ground. The DFA&T could help in several respects, including the creation of an online hub, support for capacity-building – for example, by investing in training - creating toolkits, facilitating the sharing of resources and best practices, the sharing of funding calls and grant lists, and encouraging Irish organisations to work together. There was also discussion about the need for multiannual funding via the Emigrant Support Programme (ESP), to aid sustainable planning – it is otherwise hard to build capacity as organisations become mired in crisis mode. There was comment on the value of government initiatives around which organisations could mobilise fundraising activity, such as ministerial visits, which also indicated a seal of approval for organisations. Several discussants noted the general lack of public knowledge about the ESP and the need for the government to address this.

2. Communication

The chief facilitator for this workshop was Liam Kennedy, Director of the Clinton Institute at University College Dublin. Discussants called for a website that would be imaginatively and sustainably curated to provide relevant information for stakeholders and provide calls to engagement and collaboration. There was discussion on the need to “know your audience,” to incentivise an audience by providing a sense of cause, something to identify with, and to be aware of the different needs of different groups with different needs and match the audience with the medium. It was agreed that media platforms change quickly and users should be alert to this and to the need to maintain communications. There was some scepticism about the merits of social media – it can be exclusionary and there are privacy issues – and consent that face-to-face relations and oral interchanges are important, especially in building or maintain trust. There was discussion on the need to broaden and pluralise narratives about “Ireland” and “Irish” identity, to challenge assumptions and misconceptions via education (for example, civics courses) and engage multiple audiences. There was support for initiatives in professional development, such as the use of social media, and for some form of innovation awards for diaspora organisations. There was an imaginative discussion on how to bring groups together based on the work they do – this resulted in the proposal to “twin” groups from the same sector but different countries, perhaps involving an exchange component.

3. Governance

The chief facilitator in this workshop was Jennie McShannon, Irish in Britain. The discussions centred on three key areas of governance: planning, people and money. There was some focus on the change process that organisations inevitably must deal with. The workshop considered the factors that made a board resilient and effective – these included the need for well-skilled and engaged members who understand the organisation, its goals and challenges and their role in helping the organisation meet these. There was discussion of matters of tenure and succession-planning, such as the task of “managing trustees out,” and the significance of developing and referencing a robust constitution. There was support for an online hub (a “one-stop-shop”) to provide governance resources, such as board induction packs outlining roles and responsibilities, guidelines on evaluating board and individual effectiveness, and on the management of virtual boards. The facilitator noted that “There seemed to be a real appreciation of expert input enhanced by sharing of best practice amongst participants.”

LOOKING AHEAD

The Forum functioned as a valuable space in which government and diaspora representatives could enjoy open and robust discussion about many of the matters that entail the health and sustainability of state/diaspora relations. It was significant that this was the first *civic* forum for global organisations and agents supporting the Irish

diaspora, for it materialised the energies and recognised the work – often voluntary – of organisations and individuals across the world who daily support the Irish diaspora yet only rarely if ever come into direct contact with each other. There was genuine excitement among those at the Forum about coming together and realising the potential for communication and action across the diverse constituencies and activities of the Irish diaspora. The energy, the ideas and the good will generated by the Forum should now be the springboard for considering how best to develop the capacities for engagement and support within the state/diaspora relationship and across the diaspora.

Already, Minister Deenihan has announced government support for a second Forum, by 2017. This is a welcome announcement that will have great support within the diaspora, energise those who wish to contribute to it and to the shaping of diaspora policy, and provide a point of reference for further development of diaspora engagement. Given the spirit and impetus of the Forum dialogue consideration should be given to locating the second Forum outside of Ireland. Consideration should also be given to gaining feedback and input from Forum participants on the planning of the second Forum.

There are a number of cross-cutting issues that came to the fore in the Forum discussions and these should be given due consideration in planning the next steps. The workshops were particularly valuable in drawing attention to practical needs and outcomes.

- **Connectivity and Communication**

The desire to communicate and connect was tangible among diaspora organisations and agents present at the Forum – this was evident as much in informal encounters as in the programmed discussions. Thought needs to be given as to how best facilitate and support connectivity, whether this be between state and diaspora or between different sectors or locales of the diaspora. The workshop on communications (see above) indicates some of the areas and some of the ways in which support might be made available. The Forum demonstrated that there is a strong desire within the diaspora to network and share knowledge and practice, and the DFA&T can facilitate and support such activity. The single initiative that was most frequently mentioned by Forum participants is the creation of an online hub that would be tailored to the resource needs of organisations and others supporting the global Irish diaspora. In his closing comments Minister Deenihan referred to the imminent launch of the Global Irish Newsletter and this promises to be a useful source of communication within the diaspora.

- **Capacity Building**

Following on from this desire for connectivity, the DFA&T might also consider initiatives to support professional development, such as training in the use of social media or in fundraising strategies. There are resource issues with any such initiatives but such capacity building can only be to the benefit of diaspora engagement. To aid in the professional skilling of diaspora agents is also to promote quality assurance – as a workshop facilitator noted, “Funding could be made conditional on attendance at a best practice workshop in

a relevant skill set.” Professional development might be best supported online though there is value in considering short-term training courses located in Dublin or other key diaspora sites.

- **Diversity**

The word “diversity” was widely used during the Forum to designate a sense of the need to recognise and make tangible the differences we share across the nation/diaspora space. The references to diversity were diffuse, including differences of identity, of generations, of values, of politics, of lifestyles, yet often pointed, a way of indicating the risks of exclusion in narratives of Irish identity and in policies of diaspora engagement. This speaks to an emergent understanding that Irishness, whether in its national or diasporic registers, is defined by the pluralism of those who claim it. In terms of diaspora engagement, this cannot be merely a matter of rhetoric but of policy, education and active recognition.

- **Language**

Throughout the Forum there were references to misconceptions or ambiguities about what constitutes “Irish” or “diaspora” or “emigrant” identities. In part this is due to the evolution of these identity formations, so that the very language of categorisation becomes insufficient or contested – several Forum participants spoke of their resistance to use of the word “emigrant” due to historical connotations of the term. All of this points to the need for care to be taken in the articulation of diaspora policy and of state/diaspora relations as inclusive and pluralistic.

- **Culture and Education**

Several Forum commentators underlined the importance of culture and education as bridging elements within the diverse sectors of the global Irish diaspora and in the relationship between home and away. In part, this reflects the added value of the promotion of Irish culture and heritage via the ESP and the strategic benefit of aligning support for welfare and culture within the design of diaspora policy. As for education, it was cited by Forum participants as key to the provision of fresh knowledge and understanding about the past, present and future of the diaspora and to challenging misconceptions about emigrants and immigrants. Educational institutions might also help meet the desire for professional development expressed by many workshop participants.

- **Voting**

Without question, the one matter that exercised participants as absent from the formal programme yet meriting discussion was that of voting rights within the diaspora. It may be that this issue drew energy from the recent referendums. For some this is a political matter of disenfranchisement and several made their voices heard, yet there was no singular narrative on the matter as opinions seem divided as to the merits and metrics of affording votes to Irish citizens abroad. Whatever the politics of the matter, it is a matter of concern among diaspora organisations and agents and should be acknowledged as such. It should be noted that Minister Deenihan spoke to it on several occasions during the Forum.