



Giving and Getting

Working together for Diaspora engagement

REPORT SUMMARY

Irish in Britain submission to the Comprehensive Review of Diaspora Policy announced by Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. Eamon Gilmore TD at the Global Irish Economic Forum in Dublin on 4 October 2013.

Argues that Irish citizens resident overseas have a major contribution to make to Irish public life and makes four proposals for action:

- * to end disenfranchisement of recent migrants
- * to facilitate a Diaspora vote in Presidential elections
- * to provide for Diaspora representation in the Oireachtas
- * to appoint a minister for Diaspora engagement

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CONTACT

Martin Collins
DiasporaVoice@irishinbritain.org

Jennie McShannon
jmcshannon@irishinbritain.org

Introduction

Our sense of being Irish in a foreign country traditionally sets the hardships of emigration and departure against the opportunities of new horizons. The Irish overseas have a different way of looking at things but retain an idea about what it means to be Irish and frequently add to it.

President Michael D Higgins recently expressed this in a visionary form: *“The Irishness that I believe is now emerging, even if not yet fully realised, is one that will be informed by the experience of the Irish abroad as much, or even to a greater extent, than it will be informed by those of us who live in Ireland.”*

Across the political and ideological spectrum, there is consensus that Irish well-being and economic recovery depend on our openness and global reach. As dynamic businesses know, the Irish Diaspora is a vast living resource. Not just trading on Irish products for Irish consumers, but insights into new markets, fresh ideas on products and branding, new investment, opportunities for growth; Irish enterprise and professional networks.

Irish around the world believe strongly in being Irish and supporting Ireland. From life-saving remittances in times of hardship to The Gathering of 2013, Irish migrants have displayed a profound generosity towards their families, the people and places they left behind. On a daily basis, hundreds of thousands of Irish migrants volunteer and willingly assist as ambassadors for Irish arts and sports.

The Irish Diaspora contributes economically; it boosts Ireland’s diplomatic influence overseas and enriches Irish culture. The Irish government recognises its interest in sustaining and developing an engaged Diaspora.

We believe that Irish communities and citizens overseas have a major contribution to make to Irish public life: getting involved, being engaged and having a voice. We are looking for discussion about practical measures to facilitate a step change in this direction.

To initiate such discussion, we are respectfully putting forward four proposals for action:

- * to end disenfranchisement of Irish-born citizen migrants
- * to facilitate a Diaspora vote in Presidential elections
- * to provide for Diaspora representation in the Oireachtas
- * to appoint a Minister for Diaspora engagement

Migrants should not longer be automatically disenfranchised

The Central Statistics Office reports that Ireland has lost some 300,000 citizens in the past four years, mostly adults. An estimated 420 are arriving in England each very week. This is the highest level of migration in 22 years. Among recent Irish migrants aged 25-34, over 60% are graduates. Education and training paid for by the Irish tax payer is in danger of being lost to the country.

Irish citizens moving to another country to take up a job, to look for work or any number of personal reasons will lose their right to vote. Few are aware that migrants living abroad cannot remain on the Register of Electors unless they register their intention to return within 18 months. Citizens are excluded from the electorate and can no longer vote in an election or referendum in Ireland. The only exceptions are Irish officials abroad who can register on the postal voters list along with their spouses.

The Irish Constitution, *Bunreacht na hEireann*, is the fundamental legal document that defines the sovereign state of Ireland and the rights of its citizens. It establishes the principle institutions and sets out how Ireland should be governed. The 'new' Article 2 of the Constitution, introduced as an integral part of the Good Friday Agreement, puts inclusivity at the heart of nationhood and expresses 'special affinity' with the Irish abroad at its heart.

"It is the entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish Nation. That is also the entitlement of all persons otherwise qualified in accordance with law to be citizens of Ireland. Furthermore, the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage." (Article 2 *Bunreacht na hEireann*)

Shared and contested history

People of Irish origin can today be found in countries around the world. Sovereign Ireland holds its place among a global community of nations. Yet it is in the relations between the peoples of Ireland and Britain that we find the most complex interweaving of society, politics and economics. The relations between us are rooted in both shared and contested history. Almost two hundred years passed between the 1801 Act of Union that created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 that established a mutually accepted framework for relations between sovereign states and between the peoples of these islands.

Even after the Irish declaration of independence, citizens of the Irish Free State were still regarded by London as British subjects, as were all other members of the Empire. According to the British authorities, Irish citizenship "*did no more than confer ... a national character as an Irish citizen within the wider British nationality*".

There was however a positive aspect of that legacy: Common citizenship created a template in both jurisdictions for mutual recognition of Irish and British citizens. Even before the two States became part of the European Union, Irish and British citizens had equal access to public services - education, health care and [social welfare](#). The 'Common Travel Area' allows passport-free travel between the two countries. Irish and British citizens are entitled to the right of residence. Importantly, Irish citizens retain the right to vote and stand in elections in the United Kingdom. British citizens retain the right to votes and stand in elections in Ireland (except for the election of the [President](#)).

Citizenship and Political rights

The link between citizenship and political representation is one of the most fundamental principles of democracy. It is a strange anomaly that Irish citizens in Britain - members of the Irish community - can vote in Britain but not in Ireland. British citizens living in Ireland can vote in Irish elections and remain entitled to register as overseas voters to participate in British elections. The law as it stands creates a second class of Irish citizenship for the Irish in Britain.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is a core document of international law and human rights within the United Nations. Ireland is committed to its provisions and presently sits on the UN Human Rights Council that promotes its standards worldwide.

ICCPR Article 25 provides (in part) that *“every citizen shall have an equal right and opportunity without unreasonable restrictions: (a) to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives; (b) to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors..”*

The UN provides a supplementary ‘general comment’: *“The right to vote at elections and referenda must be established by law and may be subject only to reasonable restrictions, such as setting a minimum age limit for the right to vote. It is unreasonable to restrict the right to vote on the ground of physical disability or to impose literacy, educational or property requirements.”*

This submission takes the view that the residence requirement for Irish citizens overseas to be entered on the Register of Voters goes against the grain of engagement with the Diaspora. In the era of modern communications, it is an unreasonable restriction.

Irish in Britain

The Irish in Britain constitute one of its largest minority groups. In March 2012, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, and Irish Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, declared: *“The relationship between our two countries has never been stronger or more settled, as complex or as important, as it is today. Our citizens, uniquely linked by geography and history, are connected today as never before through business, politics, culture and sport, travel and technology, and of course family ties. These vital human links are nowhere more evident than in the presence of a large, confident, valued and integrated Irish community in Britain and in the increasing number of British people who now live and work in Ireland.*

The Good Friday Agreement established an institutional framework for “East-West” relations between Ireland and Britain. The British Irish Council provides an inter-governmental link and the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA) provides a forum for elected representatives from Ireland and Britain including all the devolved governments and assemblies. BIPA has conducted two inquiries into Irish communities in Britain, including Irish Travellers.

In the 2011 Census, the population of England and Wales contained more than 600,000 people born in Ireland, north and south. Responding to the ethnic group identity question, over half-a-million declared themselves Irish. In England and Wales, some 400,000 people possess an Irish passport. The number of those with a looser Irish cultural heritage is generally taken as between 2 and 3 million. Movement between our two countries continues with net migration from Ireland to Britain rising sharply in recent years.

Strong European views on Diaspora engagement

Since the mid 1990s, the Council of Europe (COE) has been investigating the need for

governmental and intergovernmental responses to migration. There is a growing understanding that labour mobility, when well managed, is advantageous both for destination countries and countries of origin. As one COE Parliamentary Assembly resolution puts it: *“How best to manage mobility, multiple identities and diversity in a way that can maximise engagement of diasporas both in countries of origin and host countries is a challenge that governments need to tackle today.”*

The authors consider it essential to strike and maintain a proper balance between the process of integration in the host societies and the links with the country of origin. *“Policies that grant migrants rights and obligations arising from their status as citizens or residents in both countries should therefore be encouraged.”*

Council of Europe (Parliamentary Assembly Resolution 1696 (2009)) found: *“It is in the interest of member states to ensure that their diasporas continue to actively exercise the rights linked to their nationality and contribute in a variety of ways to the political, economic, social and cultural development of their countries of origin. It is convinced that globalisation and growing migration may have an impact on host countries in many positive ways by contributing to building diverse, tolerant and multicultural societies.”*

The Council of Europe believes that States *“have responsibilities towards their expatriate communities residing in another state, particularly where they form a significant national minority”*. The resolution quoted above proposes States could: *“ease the acquisition or maintenance of voting rights by offering out-of-country voting at national elections”*. It also suggests that States *“to involve diasporas in policy making, in particular concerning the issues of nationality and citizenship, as well as political, economic, social and cultural rights”*.

An earlier paper, “Links between Europeans living abroad and their countries of origin” (Rec 1650 (2004)) argued, that expatriates have a role to play as *“intermediaries between their countries of origin and host countries, and for their respective cultures, promoting co-operation and exchange in different fields, based on respect for other peoples and cultures”*. The document goes on to argue it is *“essential for all parties that the right balance between the process of integration in the host country and the links with the country of origin is defined and maintained”*.

In their approach toward the Irish overseas, successive Irish governments have worked within such a framework and played an important role in assisting community development. The Department of Foreign Affairs provides funding for the Emigrant Support Programme and supports the network of Embassies throughout the world in maintaining institutional links with expatriate communities.

The Council of Europe stresses that links be created to enable citizens overseas *“to defend their rights, express their opinions and influence any decisions which might concern them”*. Governments should *“take account of their expatriates’ interest in policy making, in particular concerning questions of nationality; political rights, including voting rights; economic rights, including taxation and pension rights; social rights, including social schemes; and cultural rights; encourage and support the activities of expatriate associations and NGOs.”*

European Union

In the European Union Citizenship Report, ‘EU Citizens: Your Rights, Your Future’ (2010), the Commission stated its belief *“that full participation of EU citizens in the democratic life of the EU at all levels is the very essence of Union citizenship”*. Accordingly, the Commission has now proposed constructive ways to enable EU citizens living in another Member State to

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participate fully in the democratic life of the EU by maintaining their right to vote in national elections in their country of origin.

On 29 January this year, EU Justice Minister, Viviane Redding asked the Irish (and four other Governments – Cyprus, Denmark, Malta and the UK) to show greater flexibility so that their own nationals are not automatically denied their vote after a certain period.

The European Commission proposed: *“Member States that limit the rights of their nationals to vote in national elections based exclusively on a residence condition should enable their nationals to make use of their right to free movement and residence in the European Union to retain their right to vote if they demonstrate a continuing interest in the political life in the Members State of which they are nationals, including through an application to remain registered on the electoral roll.”*

International Understanding

Understanding the fundamental link between citizenship and the right to vote is not restricted to Europe; the number of countries making provision for members of their diaspora communities to vote from abroad continues to rise.

In the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance handbook, “Voting from Abroad” (2007), Andrew Ellis and others found that voting from abroad is now possible for Diaspora communities from 115 home countries. Of these, 28 come from home countries in Africa; 16 in the Americas; 20 in Asia; 41 in Western, Central and Eastern Europe; and 10 in the Pacific.

We believe that Irish citizens overseas have a contribution to make and that Ireland would benefit from their greater involvement. Exclusion can no longer be justified and we urge the Government to take necessary steps to end their disenfranchisement.

Involve Irish Diaspora in the election of the President

In September 2013, the Constitutional Convention established by the Government met to consider and make representations on giving citizens resident outside the State the right to vote in Presidential elections. Irish in Britain made submissions and addressed the Convention. CEO, Jennie McShannon welcomed the thorough discussion and clear outcome in favour of the proposition as a development of immense importance for Ireland and for the Irish Diaspora.

Ever since Mary Robinson lit a candle in the window at *Aras an Uachtarain* at the outset of her presidency in 1990, the head of state has reached out to the children of Ireland scattered across the world. Presidents Mary Robinson, Mary McAleese and Michael D Higgins, have each embraced the Irish Diaspora helping set the moral tone for the nation. Each a role model and champion for universal human rights & equality. Each an advocate for conflict resolution & peace, social and economic justice.

In his inaugural address on 11 November, 2011, Michael D Higgins said: *“It is my wish to be a President for all of the Irish at home and abroad. We Irish have been a diasporic people for a great part of our history. The circumstances that have impelled - and that continue to impel - many citizens to seek employment and a better life elsewhere, are not ordained by some mysterious hand of fate.*

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They challenge our capacity to create a sustainable and prosperous economy and an inspiring model of the good society. We, in our time, must address the real circumstances that generate involuntary emigration, and resolve that in the years ahead we will strive with all our energy and intellect, with mind and heart to create an Ireland which our young people do not feel they have to leave and to which our emigrants, or their children, may wish, in time, to return to work and live in dignity and prosperity. I invite all of the Irish, wherever they may be across the world, to become involved with us in that task of remaking our economy and society."

In the United Kingdom, no citizen has ever voted for the head of state. For the Irish in Britain, having a say in the choice of President of Ireland would strengthen the ties, boost self-confidence and add to our sense of belonging. It would further change for the better the relationship between Ireland and the Irish overseas. It would give additional meaning to Article 2 of the Irish Constitution in its assertion that the Irish Nation cherishes its "special affinity" with the Irish abroad.

We believe that the symbolic role of the Irish Presidency in reaching out and representing Irish citizens wherever they are in the world has added to the enormous pool of goodwill toward Ireland. That bond can only be made stronger by the participation of citizens abroad in the democratic process determining the choice of President. We urge the Government to act on the recommendation of the Constitutional Assembly to facilitate a Diaspora vote in Presidential elections

Rights and Responsibilities

Irish in Britain responded to the announcement of Constitutional Convention in Ireland by launching "Diaspora Voice" - an initiative to make the case for a strong Irish in Britain response to the Convention chair, Tom Arnold's call for contributions; to raise awareness about the work of the Convention and encourage active participation; to highlight the contribution and potential role of the Irish Abroad and to press the case for better representation in Irish public life. Diaspora Voice has involved Irish in Britain members across the country, reaching out to the wider Irish community and the new generation of Irish migrants, organising listening events, taking advice from experts and looking at global experience.

We do not accept the argument that since Ireland has a non-executive presidency, a vote in the presidential election is a cheap token gesture and of no account. Everything we hear from our affiliates and individual members underlines a deep respect for the Presidency and support for the Government in referring this issue for the Convention to consider and make its recommendations.

Nevertheless, if it is the obligation of the State to ensure that every citizen has an **equal** right to take part in public affairs, directly or through freely-chosen representatives; to vote and to be elected in genuine elections. In all practical senses, this also means voting in elections to Dáil Éireann and participation in national referenda. In this submission, we consider some of the issues that arise in the context of such far-reaching change.

Civic responsibility

Democratic citizenship carries with it rights and responsibilities. While the right to vote is a citizen's entitlement; making an informed choice and casting a vote is a voluntary duty and civic responsibility. High voter awareness and participation depends on political parties and politicians as much as on citizen education in the community, in family and at school.

Every citizen has the right to vote regardless of their life circumstances. Men and women, rich or poor, those with disabilities or claiming benefits, members of minority groups - everyone has an equal right and responsibility to cast an informed vote.

Objection: Voters overseas wouldn't know the issues

Some argue that voters overseas won't know what the issues are. The criticism could also be levelled against many voters at home – but that doesn't lead to their disqualification - only a call for better voter education and awareness.

The experience of emigration today is transformed from that of the 1950s or even ten years ago. This generation of migrants is better educated and better informed. Communication by mobile phone, Skype and social media, keeps families in touch. Ease of travel, particularly since the advent of European low cost airlines, allows long distance relationships and provides for engagement of individuals in both their country of origin and their country of residence.

Access to news through internet, satellite and social media makes everything closer. Better relations between our countries in matters of social, economic, political and cultural policy means that migrants are no longer isolated from the political consequences of elections at home. Those who wish to do so can access sources of information, study the manifestos and form their own opinion on parties and candidates.

Those Irish living overseas who think it might be “intrusive” to cast a vote back in Ireland will make up their mind whether to participate or not. That doesn't make the case for denying others voting rights to which they are entitled.

Objection: Representation without taxation?

In her submission to the Constitutional Convention, New York-based Noreen Bowden dealt decisively with the old canard that invokes the battle call of the American revolution ‘no taxation without representation’ to support exactly the reverse argument. In 1773, settlers weren't prepared to pay taxes imposed by the colonial power on the grounds that they were not represented in its parliament. This isn't the same as saying that only tax payers can vote.

Noreen went on to suggest other ways in which overseas citizens contribute to the Irish economy. In the past, it was mainly one-way traffic - wage earners' remittances. Nowadays, overseas citizens may contribute indirectly as a result of declining property values, by property taxes, by falling investments, by costs of mortgage repayments, declining interest rates, instability of the banks, rising education and travel costs, increased costs of care for family members.

Objection: Fear of swamping

In her speech to the Constitutional Convention, Irish in Britain CEO Jennie McShannon pointed out that in history, most moves to extend the franchise were opposed by those who feared they would be swamped: the aristocracy feared votes for nobles, ruling classes feared votes for the people of no property, the patriarchy feared votes for women, and even votes at 18 was controversial for some. In each case, the change became accepted as normal in a very short period of time.

It is our belief that extending the franchise to Irish citizens resident overseas will not detract - but add to and strengthen Irish democracy – It would better reflect the will of the people. But when estimates of the size of the Irish Diaspora reach 70 million, there is a widespread expression of concern that votes of overseas residents would distort the results.

The Irish in Britain submission to the Constitutional Convention considered international experience that suggests such fears are unfounded. It is important not to exaggerate. Firstly, the number of those of Irish descent or heritage vastly exceeds the number of current passport holders who might be entitled to vote - estimated as 3 million (exact figures are unavailable). Secondly, of those who may be entitled to vote, only a small proportion would be likely to register to vote and request a voting ballot. International comparison would suggest a figure more like 300,000. (In the UK with an overseas population of 27 million, citizens are entitled to vote for up to 15 years after leaving their constituencies, yet only 23,000 register to vote). Thirdly, even those on the register must be committed to casting their vote in any given election. (If voter turnout among US registered overseas voters (a 6.8% turnout) were to be replicated by the Irish, the number of votes cast might be as low as 20,400.

The case for the right to vote has been made. The issue for Irish in Britain is not one of swamping but one on civic responsibility. To make an informed choice, to cast a vote and have it counted in regular elections is what active citizenship is all about.

How much difference might citizens overseas make?

Bearing in mind all the qualifications above, what difference might a direct comparison suggest? In the 2011 election for the Irish President, on a 56% turnout, approximately 1.8 million votes were cast. Addition of 20,400 extra voters would represent only slightly more than 1% of the vote.

In 2011 elections to Dáil Éireann, 3.5 million people voted in elections for 166 TDs – on 'average' of 25,000 for each Deputy. An addition of 20,400 votes cast would represent 0.6% of the vote – less than the votes of one TD.

Far more research would be required to make an accurate assessment of the impact of extending the franchise to Irish citizens resident overseas. But even if the increase of votes cast were *five times* greater than the calculation used here, that would still represent less than 6% of a presidential vote or 5 seats in Dáil Éireann.

Time limits for overseas citizens born in Ireland

Many States that allow non-resident voting choose to limit eligibility by the length of a citizen's absence. Canadian voters may vote by absentee ballot for up to five years following their departure so long as the voter intends to return. Australians may vote if they intend to return within six years. In the United Kingdom, voters who move abroad may continue to vote in their last constituency for 15 years after leaving. German overseas voting is limited to 25 years.

Diaspora constituency

Some countries, most notably France and Italy, have created specially designated or 'reserved' constituencies for the representation of overseas voters in national assemblies. In Ireland, such an arrangement would allay any residual fears of 'swamping' but more importantly would allow nomination of candidates for election to a constituency established to represent the experience and interests of the Diaspora.

To allow for effective representation of the global diaspora, Irish in Britain has advocated the creation of a five-seater constituency in Dáil Éireann with elected TDs reflecting the most populous regions of Irish migration. Such an arrangement would encourage politicians and political parties to engage more directly with the citizens of the Irish Diaspora and the issues that are specific to them.

Seanad Panel

In light of the referendum vote against the Government proposal to abolish the Seanad,

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discussion on Seanad reform has continued. Irish in Britain has argued for options to include the creation of a special panel that would be elected by registered overseas voters to provide a voice for the Irish Diaspora.

An element of choice

While an Irish overseas citizen previously registered to vote in Ireland may choose to continue voting in their 'home' constituency, they may subsequently wish to have their vote cast and be represented as part of the Diaspora constituency. Should such a constituency be established, it seems entirely reasonable to give those voters the opportunity to make a choice and allow them to redesignate as an "overseas voter" on the electoral register and have their votes counted in the diaspora constituency.

Practicalities of overseas voting

While the practicalities of voting from overseas will have to be examined in detail, the evidence from other countries is that there are no insurmountable barriers to an effective system of voter registration, distribution of information and administration of the ballot. A review of electoral law and rules governing donations to political parties should be undertaken to combat potential fraud and abuse.

Irish Embassies or Consulates might provide the facilities of a polling station or designate other locations. Citizens overseas could apply for a ballot paper to be sent by post and returned to be counted. On-line systems can now be put in place providing instant voting at a fraction of the cost. It would be necessary to employ suitable security for a secret ballot and scrutiny against electoral fraud. Special measures would also be required to ensure the electoral process was equally accessible to hard-to-reach sections of the community and those less familiar with digital technology.

Having considered concerns that may arise in the context of an extension of the franchise, we have looked at the means by which the Diaspora may develop a voice and seek representation in the democratic institutions of the State. We believe such a development would contribute to the life of the nation and the body politic. We urge the Government to encourage debate and involve civil society in determining the appropriate means by which to provide for Diaspora representation in the Oireachtas

A Minister for the Diaspora

The Irish Government has been consistently generous in its public acknowledgement of the Diaspora and in assistance provided through the Emigrant Support Programme. On the grand scale, the Irish in Britain are now preparing to welcome the President arriving on his historic first Irish State Visit to Britain. More modestly, the creation of the Presidential Distinguished Service Award provides annual recognition for members of our community who have served exceptionally.

In the opening of public consultation on the Foreign Policy Review, the Department of Foreign Affairs describes what is essentially a **reciprocal commitment**: *"Our people abroad have made a remarkable contribution to this country's development. Through the Emigrant Support Programme, the Dept of Foreign Affairs and Trade provides funding to not-for-profit organisations and projects that support Irish communities overseas, particularly those that address the needs of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable of our emigrants. Our engagement with the Irish Diaspora offers a strategic advantage in multiple areas, from trade and job creation, to political engagement, to promotion of culture and the Arts.*

The community served by Irish in Britain stretches from newly-arrived migrants to long-settled Irish with children who have chosen to identify with their family place of origin. It can be found in the glittering towers of Canary Wharf and City of London, through the sprawling suburbs and out to the industrial heartland. Our community reflects all the diversity of contemporary Ireland. Our point of contact may be through an online business network or a traditional sports and social club. We get news from community newspapers, broadcast media and digital platforms. We get our family gossip through visits when we can; but increasingly through E-mail, Facebook and Skype.

Irish in Britain supports a strong All Party Parliamentary Group that provides an Irish community voice in Westminster with a focus on needs of most vulnerable. The Group assists community development, promotes Irish culture & sports and raises awareness of Irish affairs.

Our "Irish Votes Count" campaign in for the 2010 General Election advertised the engagement of our community and sought dialogue with candidates across the political party spectrum on recognition of community issues.

Reciprocal engagement

For Irish in Britain - as a registered charity and part of civil society - a cross-party dialogue helps our members engage in 'big picture' issues that we would not otherwise contemplate. The parliamentary group actively supports the 'east-west' relationship between Britain and Ireland; working together on environment & climate change; planning for economic recovery; supporting reconciliation and a shared future in Northern Ireland - dealing with legacy issues on the past and appropriate commemoration through the Decade of Centenaries.

All this can only add support for the notion that we need to affirm our commitment to a reciprocal Diaspora engagement.

Support for greater Diaspora co-operation

The Irish Aid division of the Dept of Foreign Affairs and Trade sets out its Civil Society policy in some detail in a 24-page publication. The paper uses a broad-based definition of civil society that includes formal and informal organisations, associations and individuals that operate independently of the state. Examples include trade unions, professional associations, sport and cultural organisations, community-based organisations, faith-based organisations, social movements and networks, independent media and academia. It acknowledges the role of volunteers and voluntarism as crucial for the sustained operation of many civil society organisations.

Such a definition is useful in mapping the wide range of potential partnerships that Diaspora organisations can develop in their scattered national locations. Yet while specific sectors of civil society are gaining strength from developing global links, the Irish Diaspora as a whole lacks mechanisms to share experience and develop co-operation. The potential of the Diaspora is dissipated by remaining fragmented.

In the sporting and cultural field, Irish-based organisations have always benefitted from global organisation. In business and academia it is the global market that has driven change. The Good Friday Agreement has created an environment where the Metropolitan Police Emerald Society and Irish members of the London Fire Brigade can compete in the Emergency Services World Games held in Belfast.

In the appointment of Tom Arnold - the head of an Irish global aid organisation - to head Ireland's Constitutional Convention a Diaspora engagement message was clearly sent. Embassies around the world responded on their own web sites. In the informed discussion about the issue of the Diaspora vote we discovered that citizens overseas had their own experiences but were thinking very much on the same lines.

It is extraordinary that - even with the benefit of online communications, there has been virtually no discussion, sharing of experiences, transnational or joint projects, collaboration, and co-operation between immigrant support groups, community centres, health awareness initiatives across the world.

International business networks have benefited immensely from Government advice and support. It seems appropriate at this time that the DFAT should review and - in consultation with civil society and Diaspora organisations - develop an equivalent encouragement for civil society engagement across the Diaspora – an integrative approach to information and skills sharing, capacity building and policy development on a trans-national and global level.

Government Commitment

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade(DFAT)with its network of Embassies and Consulates around the world has been the critical interface for Government engagement with the Irish Diaspora that offers as described earlier *“a strategic advantage in multiple areas, from trade and job creation, to political engagement, to promotion of culture and the Arts.”*

The Government engages with the Diaspora through consular services and a plethora of activities representing the interests of Irish citizens overseas, raising awareness of Ireland and Irishness; safeguarding the reputation and standing of the Irish overseas and defending the rights of Irish citizens were necessary.

Irish diplomats represent the country but also participate in and assist community development. Embassy staff help promote Irish culture and Irish business, establishing consultative groups, providing advice to new migrants, networks and groups of all kinds.

For the DFA, the addition of a Minister for State with responsibility for Trade and Development and change of name for the Department marked a dramatic upgrading of that dimension of its work alongside state agencies to promote trade, tourism and inward investment. The work of Bord Bia, Enterprise Ireland, the Industrial Development Agency, Science Foundation Ireland and Tourism Ireland have all benefitted from having a powerful inside voice.

The commitment of the Government to recognise and engage with the Diaspora is clear. We believe the time is right for a step change in strengthening engagement with civil society and developing relations through appointment a new Minister of State with responsibility for Diaspora engagement. The Minister should have responsibility to convene a Cabinet Committee on the Diaspora chaired by the Taoiseach. Such a body would strengthen work already being done in the economic sphere and take Diaspora issues to the heart of Government.



**Irish
in Britain**

HEAD OFFICE

Irish in Britain
356 Holloway Road
London
N7 6PA
T 020 7697 4081
F 020 7697 4271


BIRMINGHAM

Irish in Britain
Room 104
Keys Court
82–84 Moseley Street
Birmingham
B12 0RT
T 0121 622 4169
F 0121 622 5613

ONLINE

info@irishinbritain.org

 @irishinbritain

 Irish in Britain

irishinbritain.org
