

A modest Proposal: Why 'Youth' Doesn't Vote, and how to Change that

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(1000 Words approx)

Young people don't care about politics. Those under 30 are apathetic, bored by news reports, and turned off by the electoral process. We're frivolous hedonists, possessing microscopic attention spans, seemingly incapable of following even the simplest of pseudo commentaries on Fox News, or reading an Evening Herald editorial aimed at the proficiency of an eight year old. We hear it all the time, so it must be true..right ?

Perhaps. Or perhaps it's stating the facts in reverse - maybe it's politics that doesn't address the concerns of youth. Politics within Ireland is heavily parochial, driven by the dual mandate to focus on the cantankerous concerns of the nagging neighbors of each little town and parish. Politics in the EU is at a remove and tends to focus on trade, a fascinating area to those interested in the interplay of power between government and industry, but dust dry and well beyond the ken of the 'man in the street'. By contrast, international politics, from the specific, such as the 'liberation' of Iraq, to the general, like the plight of the exploited South, are areas of growing interest and activism for the supposedly apathetic and atomised generation 'whatever'. Drawn into the great debates of the age, from Globalization to American imperialism, through populist critiques of contemporary institutions like Naomi Klein's 'No Logo', and Joel Bakan's 'The Corporation'; this generation is becoming more politicised than any before.

We are accustomed to think of the 1960's as the archetypal decade of dissent and political involvement. But as Chomsky points out in 'Hegemony or Survival', widespread protest against the war in Vietnam didn't begin until well after the body bags began to return East. By comparison, the proposed invasion of Iraq, on what later turned out to be spurious grounds, provoked a series of enormous worldwide protests. Protests which occurred before the war had even begun ! Ireland was no exception, as between 80 and 200 thousand people, many of them under 30, took to the streets in Dublin alone, to voice their dissent.

Much is made of young people's lack of participation in political institutions, low youth voter turnouts - let's ignore for a moment the recent American elections, which provoked the highest youth vote in US history - and disengagement from the political process. But these problems may stem from a fundamental disengagement not of young people from politics, but politicians from the issues that are important, and views which appear coherent to young people.

As the debates surrounding the constitutional crisis provoked by the X case stormed in 1992 I remember as a bewildered 12 year old, wondering if those arguing either side of the debate occupied the same universe as myself. They seemed divorced from reality, arguing semantics and constitutional niceties as a raped little girl underwent national humiliation. My point isn't that I disagreed with the tenor of the debate, it's more fundamental than that. The decision was being discussed in an almost jesuitical manner I couldn't relate to. It wasn't dealing with the central issues at stake, but focusing on finding 'an Irish solution to an Irish problem' - to my 12 year old mind, a hypocritical compromise.

Hypocrisy is one subject 'naive' young people agree on. Whether youth defense supporters or Indymedia volunteers, young people see political involvement as a subject of conviction. A laudable view - yet herein lies the problem, as well as the explanation for the apparent disengagement of youth from the conventional political system.

Politics as it is practiced universally in representative democracy's, and more in Ireland than most, is the business of compromise. While our electoral system uses a PR model, the largest political parties still rely on traditional blocks of support. Fianna Fail, Fianna Gael, and to a lesser extent the revitalized Sinn Fein, draw votes from combinations of clearly distinguished groups - farmers, the working poor, homeowners - and hence must endeavor to be all things to all people, or at least a variety of things to a sizable minority. A strategy which may please loyal cadres of 'traditional' voters, whose views were solidified some time in the cretaceous era; but one unlikely to draw favor from impassioned idealists. And it is as impassioned idealists, rather than jaded cynics, that my generation is best described. We read politics blogs online, march against illegal wars, attend political activist meetings and queue around the block to boo Tony Wentworth at the GMB. What we do not do, at least not in Ireland in significant numbers, is join traditional political parties, or more importantly - vote.

There is a solution to this apparent impasse. And the answer is of course, true democracy. Representative democratic systems are designed to appease 'the great beast', to provide the illusion of freedom and participation, while avoiding its substance, 'the tyranny of the majority'. But, it doesn't have to be this way. Advances in technology which are allowing the curtailing of our freedom, from 'police eye' cameras, to compulsory identity cards; could instead be used to allow the public a greater say in the running of government. This country has a fine history of referenda, one we could expand, leading the way for an open, literally rather than representatively democratic system.

This would be done by handing the day to day decisions of government to the people, the specifics are unimportant, but there are numerous ways - from text messages to email, that new technology could allow such decisions to be publically debated and secretly polled. We would of course still need civil servants, to implement policy and represent us abroad. But for the first time, the policies they would implement and the positions they would represent would be those suggested, vigorously debated, and voted on directly by the public. Perhaps the sky would fall in, and society collapse into a smoking ruin, as rabble freed from the bonds of just law fell on one another. Or perhaps truly franchised citizens, young and old alike, would read more, engage with public debate, demand more accountability, and in truly participate in a politics which need no longer be termed unrepresentative.

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