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## Unmasking the 'Quiet Man': Exploring Ireland's Quiescent Response to Economic Crisis and Austerity

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## Unmasking the ‘Quiet Man’<sup>1</sup>:

### Exploring Ireland’s Quiescent Response to Economic Crisis and Austerity

Gemma Carney and Katy Hayward

So what am I going to do about it? Nothing. I’m not a ‘rabble rouser’, I wish I was, but I am not. It’s going to take someone else to do something that will get the ball rolling, and I’ll follow them. And instead of complaining and tweeting about how angry we are, we should do something practical. Otherwise, let us just drop our trousers and take what we deserve, again and again.<sup>2</sup>

#### Introduction

This chapter uses on-line comments, blogs and posts made by ordinary men and women living in Ireland to unmask Europe’s ‘Quiet Man’ of austerity, the Republic of Ireland. Quotations from social media sites illustrate a private anger that is masked by public quiescence towards a severe programme of austerity since 2010. The chapter begins with a brief recent economic history of the Irish crisis. It continues by outlining the role of the mainstream media, as part of a complicity of elites in Ireland, whose actions precipitated the Celtic Tiger boom, bust and consequent austerity programme. Next we contrast the lack of critique of elites and neoliberal economic policies in the mainstream media with the frustration and powerlessness expressed by Ireland’s on-line community. The chapter then returns to the core research question: why have Irish citizens chosen not to protest? In addressing this question, we continue to draw on the on-line writings of ordinary citizens while offering possible root causes of the consequent crisis of citizenship. We conclude that democratic citizenship needs to offer new opportunities for political expression and engagement if democracies are to survive the crisis of capitalism of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. To this end, we finish the chapter with a discussion of new opportunities for civic involvement in Ireland.

#### *From boom, to bust, to bailout*

The absence of industrial revolution meant that the modernisation of Ireland’s economy saw

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<sup>1</sup> The Quiet Man (John Ford, 1951) is a Hollywood film starring Maureen O’Hara and John Wayne set in rural Ireland pre membership of the European Economic Community. It covers themes of rural poverty, emigration and unequal gender norms.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Gaius Gracchus’, comment on *The Journal*, 29 April 2014, <http://www.thejournal.ie/anglo-trial-sentencing-1437992-Apr2014/> (accessed 18 July 2014, punctuation corrected).

it inch away almost directly from agrarian nationalism towards a post-industrial society in the second half of the twentieth century. The rapid economic expansion that began in the mid-1990s (the fastest in the OECD) was based on the growth of high-tech, profitable industries (e.g. IT and pharmaceuticals), the attraction of Foreign Direct Investment (mainly from the US), and on building on its location as a ‘gateway’ to the EU single market. The Celtic Tiger (so-called because of its apparent similarity to the rapidly industrialised, low tax, minimal welfare economies of the so-called Asian Tigers) saw almost full employment met with a sudden increase in inward migration. The growth of Ireland’s population helped fuel the demand for housing, and it was the property ‘bubble’, together with a huge expansion in credit, that helped sustain Ireland’s economic growth in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Nolan et al., 2014). Reliance on credit and the construction industry meant that Ireland was pushed into a devastatingly tenuous position by the global financial crisis of 2007/8. In late 2008, the Irish government provided a guarantee to cover the assets and liabilities of the six domestic banks (including Anglo Irish), totaling 440 billion euro (Allen, 2012: 423). Furthermore, over the next two years the Irish state invested 64 billion euro in a bank bailout (including 25 billion euro for Anglo Irish).<sup>3</sup> The nationalisation of these corporate dues may be viewed as a logical consequence of the fact that the management of financial risk in Ireland had been moved out of the political/legal sphere into the economic sphere (e.g. resting with the consumer and the retail banks) (Taylor, 2011).

The intertwining of the public purse with private debt had become dangerously tight and, in the context of a rapidly shrinking economy and increasing exposure of the banks’ liabilities, the state itself faced financial catastrophe. After months of deliberation and denial, the government sought financial intervention from the so-called Troika of the International Monetary Fund, EU, and European Central Bank in November 2010 (totalling 67 billion euro in all). This request for assistance was a particularly bitter pill to swallow for a country that had, effectively, had its independence realised through EU membership. So when the punishing ‘rescue programme’ that accompanied the bailout (including cuts in welfare payments and public sector jobs) became known, the popular reaction was one of fairly virulent and widespread resentment towards the EU, whose contribution was viewed less in terms of charitable benefaction than of hostile takeover (Gillespie, 2012). These views were expressed through social media as the mainstream media joined ‘a broad intellectual consensus that

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.irishtimes.com/business/economy/government-was-told-in-2008-bank-bailout-would-cost-16-4bn-1.1731972> (accessed 21 June 2015).

straddled the state, business, conventional economists and the media' that Ireland had no alternative but to accept the severe programme of austerity recommended by the Troika (Allen, 2012: 425).

## **Role of the media in the Irish crisis**

### *Complicity in the mainstream media*

This lack of distinct political vision allows media to direct politics in covert and overt ways. It is not that there is a powerful conspiracy of media moguls to control and direct politics towards their own ends, rather it is primarily the absence of ideology and objective that encourages and directs politics to take its cues from the media, to look upon the media as expressing the will and desire of the people (*The Auld Squint, 2014*).

Throughout the period of the Celtic Tiger, the bust, bailout and now faltering recovery period, the media has occupied a significant but under-stated role of compliance and support for an elite consensus in Ireland (Allen, 2012). Significantly, a substantial portion of the mainstream Irish media is owned by large conglomerates with a global reach; some individual media company directors in Ireland have had well-publicised (and somewhat dubious) links to politicians.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, some of the most interesting use of social media for popular political engagement and activity has been an outworking of public distrust of the independence of mainstream media.<sup>5</sup> More generally, mainstream media in Ireland has, in the past, enjoyed a certain amount of political influence, not least because of the close networks forged between many politicians and journalists in the early days of their careers (the debating societies in Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin, for example, are

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, billionaire owner of two national and four local radio stations, plus holder of a large stake in 'Independent News and Media', Denis O'Brien, was implicated in making a series of payments to the then Minister for Communications prior to being awarded a lucrative mobile phone licence by the state (<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/republic-of-ireland/no-probe-over-media-moguls-empire-28775500.html>, accessed 22 June 2015).

<sup>5</sup> For example, citizens used social media in a particularly virile way when Denis O'Brien won a High Court injunction in May 2015 against the state broadcaster, RTÉ, publishing the speech of a member of Dáil Éireann, independent TD Catherine Murphy, in which she used parliamentary privilege to make public the existence of a special arrangement made regarding O'Brien's debt held with the now state-owned bank IBRC. Although several leading online news platforms relented from publishing the relevant details (e.g. The Journal.ie), the most interactive parts of online forums were used to publicise people's views on the action of perceived censorship. For example, comments sections on apparently random stories were used by individuals to paste relevant sections of the TD's speech.

often cited in political memoirs as being important loci for forging their political engagement and social networks). The collaboration between media and political institutions has created circles of mutually reinforcing consensus in which there is little space for an ‘alternative’ or ‘radical’ response to the programme outlined by government (Allen, 2012). And so, in ‘austerity Ireland’, mainstream media has largely contributed to the construction of an image of a nation of externally focused, hard-working, English speaking Europeans – an image that was seen by political elites as a critical asset for securing the country’s return to the global markets, as seen in its support of the ‘Global Irish Network’ and ‘Global Irish Economic Forum’ initiatives since 2009.<sup>6</sup>

Such support of the mainstream media for the ‘vision’ of the government is nothing new; one significant case was the complicity of the media in fuelling the property bubble. Activity in the housing market in the final years of the boom (2004-2007) heralded a new era in Irish home ownership. Many people were buying not just homes to reside in, but ‘buy to let’ properties (both in Ireland and abroad), which they planned to sell on at a profit within a short period of time. Silke and Preston (2014) undertook a content analysis of Ireland’s two largest and most influential newspapers in the period towards the end of this boom, just prior to the May 2007 general election. They found Ireland’s leading broadsheet newspaper, the *Irish Times*, to have an ‘agenda-setting role in the Irish media sphere’ and a ‘vested interest in the housing market through the substantial income derived in property supplements in both papers and including major investments in a property website’. As significant, they argue, is the failure of that paper to voice critical concerns as the property market over-heated, instead choosing to discuss housing exclusively in terms relevant to its market value (Silke and Preston, 2014). Moreover, and perhaps most disastrously, the media failed to report on the over-production of housing in any meaningful or critical way (Silke and Preston, 2014). Such media silence on the broader social implications of housing policy were, arguably, as damaging as the actions of politicians who signed off on excess zoning, the developers who inflated prices, or the bankers who approved unaffordable mortgages with forty year terms. Perhaps most damning of all, Silke and Preston (2014: 24) found ‘no reportage on the power nexus between property developers, financiers and senior politicians’, possibly because, they speculate, the *Irish Times* was part of this nexus.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.globalirishforum.ie/GlobalIrishNetwork.aspx> (accessed 22 June 2015).

### *Dissenting journalists within the mainstream media*

While Silke and Preston's analysis applies to the media in general, one or two of the most virulent and articulate critiques of the neoliberal programme of capitalist expansion have emerged from media circles, although dissenting voices tend to come in the form of individual journalists. Fintan O'Toole, a columnist with the *Irish Times* has published a number of bestselling books, most notably *After the Ball* (2003) and *Enough is Enough* (2010), on the problems of Ireland's cosy consensus. In 2012, he started a series of Townhall style meetings around the country called 'Four Angry Men', which featured O'Toole and three other notable columnists (Nick Webb, from the *Irish Independent*, David McWilliams, of TV3, and outspoken independent politician Shane Ross). O'Toole and his troupe used social media and public-speaking to attempt to galvanise what they perceived as the latent anger of Irish citizens that the country's hard won economic and political independence had been squandered by elites.<sup>7</sup>

This activity was perhaps the alternative to running for election, which O'Toole had considered in 2011.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps his decision against doing so was influenced by the experience of George Lee, Radio Telefís Éireann's (the national broadcaster) chief economic correspondent during the period that Ireland began to slide into bust. Through his reporting of that period he made a number of attempts to warn of over-heating in the housing market and irresponsible lending practices. Such was Lee's popularity (and desire for political change) that he moved into politics, topping the poll for the then opposition Fine Gael party in South Dublin in a June 2009 by-election. However, he quickly became disillusioned with the failure of the new government to utilise his economic expertise. He resigned his seat just nine months later, thereby inciting further disillusion among the general public who had broadly welcomed his attempt to bring such critical expert analysis to Dáil Éireann. Given that a lack of economic expertise in the State Department of Finance had been cited as a contributing factor in the series of disastrous decisions that led to Ireland's downfall, the words of a blogpost on the *Sluggor O'Toole* website seem poignant:

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, 'Four Angry Men', [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xrR\\_ATySTY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xrR_ATySTY) (accessed 22 June 2015).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.irishtimes.com/debate/the-decision-that-i-made-on-contesting-this-general-election-1.1280015> (accessed 22 June 2015).

You have to wonder at the thought processes that led to Fine Gael luring an external, high profile, economics expert and then excluding him from economic policy formulation in the midst of the state's biggest economic crisis. When the government benches are stocked with solicitors and school teachers, George Lee surely should have been an invaluable asset.<sup>9</sup>

### *The scope of online and social media*

One consequence of Ireland's favourable corporation tax regime and English speaking population is that it has attracted some of the world's largest and most powerful social media corporations; Google, Facebook and Twitter all have European headquarters in Dublin. In many ways, this is quite appropriate as some of the most virulent and imaginative responses to the economic and political crisis have come through online commentary and spread through social networks. In terms of debate, some fresh ideas emerge through online forums (such as [www.politics.ie](http://www.politics.ie)). The most successful of these appear to be connected to already established organisations ([www.politicalreform.ie](http://www.politicalreform.ie) is linked to the Political Studies Association of Ireland, for example, and 'Generation Emigration' is a forum hosted by the *Irish Times*, <http://www.irishtimes.com/blogs/generationemigration>). Journalists also utilise these forums for broadening audiences and debate. Slugger O'Toole ([www.sluggerotoole.com](http://www.sluggerotoole.com)), for example, has regular contributions from well-known journalists; indeed, it is convened by Mick Fealty, whose work has been published in mainstream media. Although 'opinion portals' such as Slugger O'Toole create space for an exchange of ideas, a cursory analysis of blog comments show a predominance of regular contributors who appear to take pleasure in repeating tropes that conflict with those of others. The debate, thus, often becomes quite personalised rather than broadly political, giving the impression of an in-house, largely male-dominated discussion rather than a forum for conceiving new forms of political engagement.

Some of the most ascerbic and ideological critiques of the state of democracy in austerity Ireland are to be found online in blog form rather than in newspapers. Notably, some of the most successful are not written by 'professional' commentators (such as journalists or

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<sup>9</sup> Post by 'Mack', <http://sluggerotoole.com/2010/02/08/george-lee-resigns-from-fine-gael/> (accessed 22 June 2014).

academics). One such blog, *The Auld Squint* is written by a family doctor from the west of Ireland; in a lengthy posting in Spring 2014, he made the following judgement of the state of political debate in Ireland which neatly encapsulates a weary response to some of the political corruption we noted above:<sup>10</sup>

The dialogue that has evolved between politicians and television cameras can be seen as a dialogue between politics and the public; it is in general a narrow dialogue with tight restraints upon personal opinion and tastes – politicians cannot be (and are encouraged not to be) ‘themselves’ ... in most instances one can tell exactly what type of an answer the politician must make to a particular question; responses are entirely measured and rarely if ever surprising.

Other blogs use satire (such as *The Mire*, tagline: ‘on a clear day you can see the confusion for miles’, <http://www.themire.net/>) to enliven political interest, or a form of investigative journalism (as in the scrutiny of the National Assets Management Agency on this blog <http://namawinelake.wordpress.com/>) to inform it. The news media is also utilising forms of online communication, with *The Journal* (<http://www.thejournal.ie/>) being one of the newest and most successful apps for mobile phones that brings both news and opinion pieces and that facilitates debate through its ‘comments’ function and use of Twitter hashtags. *The Journal’s* coverage of the outcome of the Anglo trial, for example, generated thousands of comments. One such comment, after the announcement of the sentencing of the two directors was this:

I remember sitting in a bar beside the Grand Canal in Dublin in September, 2008 after work... it was packed, and everyone hushed when the news came on [and] it was confirmed, despite the denials, that the IMF were not only in town, but they had a list of demands. The blood drained from everyone’s faces. That was almost 6 years ago, and nothing has happened since.

I consider myself a passive, rational thinker, and I’ve been a keyboard warrior for at least 6 years (whey!), I admit that. And, yes, I’ve been on marches, but they came to nothing – adding to my disillusion. I’ve been deflated again and again.

It is clear that these forums create spaces for ‘venting’ but they do not create opportunities for political mobilisation; what is missing, of course, in such forums is leadership and political influence. Even more concerning is the impression of utter despair and cynicism in posts such

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<sup>10</sup> Marcus de Brun, ‘Michael D. and the “Incestuous bastard”. (Parts 1&2)’, <http://drmd Brun.blogspot.ie/2014/04/michael-d-and-incestuous-bastard.html#gpluscomments> (accessed 18 July 2014, punctuation corrected).



as these; such sentiments – and their inhibiting effects on political mobilisation – have deep roots and causes in Ireland’s political culture.

### **Root causes of the crisis of citizenship in Ireland**

The Anglo-Irish [Bank] collapse has the public looking at the effect rather than the cause of the problem: a mentality inherited from centuries of occupation by a hostile power. So, the Irish were taught to think of themselves as buffoons who always got it wrong. Very useful for all the people around who were picking their pockets.<sup>11</sup>

This comment posted underneath an online *Irish Times* article at the start of the Anglo Trial explains this form of corruption, the apparent impunity of Ireland’s elite class, and the apparent compliance of its population, through the legacy of colonialism. Internationally recognised for his work on political economy, O’Riain (2014: 173), sees the root causes of Ireland’s downfall in more nuanced terms:

corruption, party patronage, close relations with corporate or lobby groups, and a more generalised set of close ties between political and economic elites that lead them to forming a similar view of what is ‘rational’.

Ó Riain (2014: 178, 233) argues that the form of neoliberalism that became the dominant view of Ireland’s elites (placing emphasis on economic ‘growth’ above all else) went hand in hand with a new form of corporatism. In this section, we identify the root causes of the crisis of citizenship in Ireland as its post-colonial heritage, the legacy of corporatism and the unhealthily close relations between media, political and economic elites.

#### *Corporatism*

Carney et al. (2011) identify the permissive, voluntary nature of Ireland’s form of corporatism as distinguishing it from European counterparts. Ireland’s system of collective bargaining, praised for its effective maintenance of labour market flexibility for over three decades was heavily tipped in favour of corporate interests: emphasising cost competitiveness in wages and placing little or no emphasis on levels of equality between citizens (Rhodes, 2001; Ornston, 2012). The social partnership agreements negotiated between 1987 and 2010

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<sup>11</sup> Comment posted by ‘MichaelScott’, February 2014, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/the-anglo-trial/on-trial-three-former-anglo-irish-bank-executives-1.1675254> (accessed 25 July 2014).

centred on union compliance in wage agreements, to the exclusion of social needs. Social partnership was cited as ‘the only game in town’ in terms of policy-making (Murphy, 2002). Internationally, partnership was credited as a major factor in Ireland’s economic success (Hyeong-ki, 2012; Dellepiang and Hardiman, 2012; Hardiman, 2002). There are also notable examples of failed attempts at social reform using the system of corporatism, not least the Developmental Welfare State which sought to invest in public services through a system of ‘tailored universalism’ (National Economic and Social Council, 2005). The proposed welfare state followed an East Asian model (Aspalter, 2008) which hoped to combine low spending and a flexible labour market with targeted and efficient social security measures. Ireland’s Developmental Welfare State fell foul of the same design flaw of the South Korean version in that it was ‘based on the assumption of full employment’ (Kwon, 2005; 480 cited in Carney et al. 2011: 19).

More fundamentally, reliant as it was on voluntary market mechanisms, once the global economic crisis hit Irish shores, the whole system of social partnership fell into disuse. Throughout its lifetime commentators such as academic and former local politician Mary Murphy had critiqued the inclusion of civil society as junior partners in the system of corporatism (O’Bríoin and Murphy, 2013). She was not alone in arguing that social partnership had disarmed civil society, seriously depleting the civic capacity of Ireland’s people. Gaynor (2011: 497) argues that social partnership:

has resulted in a considerably weakened public sphere with neither the institutional apparatus nor the discursive capacity to seek accountability from political and civic leaders at a time of profound crisis within the Irish state.

While corporatism may have damaged the capacity of Irish citizens to question elites – even as seen in the mainstream media – it would be naïve to assume that exercising citizenship in Ireland was ever straightforward. Along with many other liberal democracies, Ireland is experiencing a crisis of citizenship with two main causes: a colonial history and rising levels of income inequality. Next, we will turn to Ireland’s colonial heritage to understand the particular version of ‘client-ship’ available to its member citizens.

### *Client-ship in a post-colonial state*

Robins, Cornwall and von Lieres (2008) claim that the imposition of western notions of

citizenship onto post-colonial states is problematic in both theoretical and practical terms. Basing their theorisation on the experience of ‘democratisation’ in developing countries, they identify a number of difficulties, often related to the relationship between the newly independent state and its former coloniser (Robins et al., 2008). Fundamentally, the ideal of liberal individualism that underpins the customary concept of citizenship endorsed by donors and international organisations is often found to remain an abstract notion in postcolonial states. In its place, Robins et al. (2008: 1075) argue that alternative forms of citizenship arise in a political and civic culture affected by the colonial legacy. Hence the pervasiveness of a clientelist form of citizenship in many developing countries; resources are distributed via a system of patronage, family networks and historical/tribal traditions that cannot be overwritten simply by declaring full and equal participation of citizens.

The usefulness of the ‘post-colonial’ label has been the topic of lively scholarly debate in Ireland and, indeed, heated comments in online discussion forums (Kennedy, 1992). An independent state since 1922, Ireland’s party system is divided along both sides of a nationalist fault line and is still largely shaped by a political culture forged through the war of independence. Notably, the same is true of Northern Ireland, being created via the partition of the island territory in 1921 (Clayton, 1996; Wright, 1987). Despite establishing its status as a Republic, exit from the British Commonwealth, membership of the European Union and other markers of a highly developed state, Ireland has struggled to shake off two legacies of the colonial experience: a narrow form of clerical nationalism and a tradition of ‘clientelism’ (Whyte, 1980). In the Republic of Ireland, the cumulative impact of several high profile scandals of abuse and cover-up by the Church has, only now, seen its political influence diminish (McDonald, 2011). Under conditions of client-ship, ‘politicians present themselves as both patrons *and* democratic representatives, and the two mesh quite seamlessly’ (Robins et al., 2008: 1076). It is this failure to recognise a conflict of interest that has led to what some have identified as Ireland’s ‘golden circle’ of political and economic elites.

### *State under-pinning of Ireland’s golden circle*

The closest Ireland has come to retribution for the reckless lending that pushed its banking sector to collapse – a collapse so catastrophic it brought Ireland’s economy down with it – was the so-called ‘Anglo Trial’. In January 2014, three executives from the Anglo Irish Bank

were tried in Dublin's Criminal Court of Justice for giving financial assistance to sixteen of its own customers (from the so-called 'golden circle' of Ireland's richest) to buy shares in the bank. The loans from the bank to buy these shares (which amounted to 619 million euro) were made in an unlawful effort to prop up its stock value in the face of imminent implosion. The trial concluded after eleven weeks of headline-grabbing testimony: all three men walked free. The chairman of the bank was found not guilty on all charges; the two directors were convicted but were neither imprisoned nor fined, instead they were put on probation to be considered for 'community service'. The Judge's rationale for imposing the most lenient of penalties was that the men had been 'led into' illegal action by a State agency, namely the Irish Financial Regulator.<sup>12</sup> In essence, the reason why the Irish people saw no justice from a trial of (at worst) extraordinary corruption and (at best) financial mismanagement was that the State itself was culpable. Author of the *Crimson Observer* blog (<http://crimson-observer.blogspot.com/>), Myles Duffy, managed to get his letter on the vast sums paid to members of Ireland's 'golden circle' published in the *Irish Times*. Commenting on the credibility of Duffy's letter, another blog, *True Economics* (<http://trueeconomics.blogspot.co.uk/>) expresses the horror of ordinary Irish people at the depth to which elite collusion had penetrated even regulatory bodies such as the Irish Central Bank:

An excellent letter today in the Irish Times by Myles Duffy... puts into perspective the real extent of Ireland's Golden Circle - reaching, cancer-like deep into our public service leadership. I have questioned in this blog on several occasions the competency of the CBFSAI [Central Bank and Financial Services Authority in Ireland].

The close relationship between the political and financial elites of Ireland's 'Celtic Tiger' (the period of rapid economic growth from the mid-1990s) has long been public knowledge. In fact, the lack of trade union and organised political resistance to its liberal corporate taxation regime was seen as a major *asset* in Ireland's successful recruitment of job creating multi-national companies (O'Sullivan and Miller, 2010). This absence of opposition helped to normalise an increasingly cosy relationship between national political goals and private economic interests. In the late 1990s, the 'rezoning' of land for the benefit of property developers by corrupt local government councillors in their pay was but a taster of the heady

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/the-anglo-trial/judge-s-excoriating-critique-of-regulator-gives-trial-a-remarkable-postscript-1.1778054> (emphasis added, accessed 25 July 2014).

scandals to come (see Mahon, 2012). The ‘Director Network’ (TASC, 2011) made sense in the context of heady Celtic Tiger neoliberalism. If the international reputation, welfare and future of the nation depended on maintaining a frantic pace of economic growth, political *facilitation* of the leading agents of capitalism was considered not only necessary but virtuous.

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems obvious that good decision-making was unlikely to emerge from this level of elite consensus. As well as the damage that has been done to Ireland’s economy, perhaps more insidious is the loss of trust in the state-citizen relationship at national level. Loss of economic sovereignty forced citizens to assume that domestic protest was futile given that the ‘real power’ lay elsewhere. By 2014, ordinary people were feeling well and truly abandoned, fooled and exploited by Ireland’s elite:

Those in power are laughing at me, they’re laughing at you, they’re laughing at all of us. This country has become a shameful f\*\*king joke, where people with a sh\*tload of money now know they can p\*ss all over the rest of us, all day, every day, forever and ever.<sup>13</sup>

Given the dominance of neoliberal economic policy-making, the failure of national and supranational bodies to regulate the country’s financial elite, attention is turning to citizen-led alternatives, such as those offered by participatory forms of democratic participation.

#### *New opportunities for citizen involvement*

The quality of democratic deliberation in a society plays an important role in determining what new political spaces are available for civic engagement (Gaventa, 2006). Cornwall and Coelho identify these participatory policy-making spaces as ‘crucibles for a new politics of public policy’ (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007: 2). Recent calls to devolve power to the citizen, referred to as ‘the deliberative turn’ in democratic theory, is about expanding democratic participation beyond periodic voting in elections (Dryzek, 1996). In this vein, responding to the democratic deficit posed by significant emigration, some have raised the question of voting rights for non-resident citizens, after finding that social media allows Irish emigrants to maintain a high level of knowledge of current affairs, political and economic questions in their homeland (Honohan, 2011: 559; Glynn 2013). This would be one means of extending

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Gaius Gracchus’, comment on *The Journal*, 29 April 2014, <http://www.thejournal.ie/anglo-trial-sentencing-1437992-Apr2014/> (accessed 18 July 2014, punctuation corrected).

the scope of citizen involvement in response to the hollowing out of Irish democracy; more broadly, citizens need to have more involvement in political decision-making, ‘from defining priorities, to shaping policy proposals, to monitoring implementation’ (Gaventa and McGee, 2010; 7). Given its powerful potential, deliberation is even recognised by some as a ‘revolutionary political ideal’ (Fung quoted in Bächtiger et al., 2010).

The ‘Constitutional Convention’ announced through a resolution of the Irish Oireachtas (parliament) in July 2012 was described as a ‘new venture in participative democracy in Ireland’ ([www.constitution.ie/](http://www.constitution.ie/)). The convention was a forum of 100 people, one third of whom are parliamentarians and two thirds of whom are ‘representative’, randomly selected Irish citizens. It was tasked with considered specific amendments to the Irish constitution to make it ‘fully equipped for the 21<sup>st</sup> century’. It published its final report in March 2014, but it is likely that its greatest impact will be in the form of breaking the ground for new forms of participatory citizenship and deliberation to emerge in a changing Ireland (Convention, 2014). However, the convention itself is a creation of elites, albeit political scientists such as David Farrell convinced that ordinary citizens can make good decisions. In his own blog, and accompanying opinion piece in the Irish Times, Farrell has a ‘ye of little faith in the Irish people’ message:

However, even before it is up and running the government’s constitutional convention has been roundly condemned from all quarters, with most criticism devoted to its agenda – as too piecemeal – and its makeup – as ill-conceived. Only time will tell if the critics are proven right. But, right or wrong, what cannot be denied is that by its very establishment the constitutional convention is a bold new step by an Irish government. Its like has not been seen before – in this country, on this island, or for that matter on these islands. (Farrell, 2012 at <http://politicalscience.ie/?p=171>).

It would seem that the private anger of the bailout era has slowly translated to a logic of apathy; people living with the welfare cutbacks, soaring unemployment and emigration of the bust and bailout period have internalised their powerlessness. The internalisation of the notion that one’s views are worthless and that collective action is hopeless is, ultimately, devastating for democracy (Gaventa, 1982). The quiescence of Irish citizens reflects the insidious effects of a dominant discourse, namely that if Ireland is to recover sovereignty, it needs to return to the global capital markets with credibility. Therefore, so the argument goes,

Ireland is simply in no economic or political position to do anything other than to accept the bailout, comply with the requirements of the Troika and conform to the role of what Allen terms ‘model pupil of the IMF’ (Allen, 2012). Proponents of reform in Ireland have a series of hills to climb: re-building the economy, re-building trust in national level politicians and reform of the institutions which led to Ireland’s problems. The challenge for any such new form of democracy will be to transform the representation of citizens into something that will make a legitimate and effective impact on the issues that matter most to them: such as health, employment, education, and, it must be said, tax compliance.

## **Conclusion**

The unprecedented challenges faced by citizens living through the ‘Eurozone crisis’ tests to its limits the democratic imperative that ‘all citizens are equal’. Throughout this chapter we have considered the ways in which the erosion of democratic accountability was increasingly apparent to the Irish public by the end of the period of capitalist expansion known as the Celtic Tiger era. The extent of this vacuum was revealed through the harsh consequences of an abuse of political and economic power. Worse still: such a political vacuum was facilitated by the complicity of the mainstream media in ignoring the growing inequality perpetuated by the Celtic Tiger. The mainstream media’s presentation of the subsequent austerity measures shows a similar lack of challenge or critique; this is in stark contrast to the predominant discourses of the new media. But the power of new media, of course, is affected by the fact that the vast majority of online commentators are still primarily informed by the publications of professional journalists. Commentators in online media can form opinions in reaction to the information provided by those in the mainstream media; what is different now is that they can begin to have some influence in shaping and channeling wider public opinion on these issues. Forums of new media also provide a platform for those with relevant professional expertise (though, notably, the predominant profession represented are economists) to reach a wider audience and again shape opinions. This gentle diversification of opinion formers and the quite radical expansion of public discussion means that Ireland’s ‘Golden Circle’ is surely more exposed. To shake its grip on political power, however, more fundamental measures need to be taken.

We conclude by arguing that the only way to tackle the political dimensions of rising inequality and division in Ireland and wider Europe is to reform political institutions in way that develops civil society and civic participation. This runs counter to a trend of marginalising democratic

processes of accountability and opposition that has been long-set in Ireland. Worse than that, the bailout of ‘Ireland’ was arguably in the same vein as the bailout of its banks: both represented a voluntary disempowering of the State by those in charge of it – a trend that is at the heart of why Ireland was seen as the ‘model’ neoliberal economy and, appropriately, came to be seen as the ‘model’ for austerity (Robbins and Lapsley, 2014). It also helps explain why the effects of rampant neoliberalism in the country (either in the form of growing inequality during the boom years or painful recession in the bust) have not been subject to a groundswell of protest from the Irish people. The failure of the Irish people to take to the streets to demand a better government, or to demand better terms from the Troika, is borne from a deep awareness of the nation’s relative powerlessness on the world stage. A worrying implication of this quiescence is that national-level politicians will find it hard to recover legitimacy when Ireland does ‘recover’ its economic sovereignty. For such reasons, the task of rebuilding democracy in Ireland cannot be achieved through export-led growth, through Criminal Court trials of bankers or through tribunals exposing state corruption. Instead, democracy in Ireland must reaffirm the equality and political rights of its citizens and create new mechanisms for their involvement in shaping the future of the state. Only such change will counter the quiet cynicism expressed by the blogger, *The Auld Squint*:

All politicians appear to want the same thing, a ‘greater good’; this greater good seems to be a universal assumption, and all that distinguishes one from the other is the manner by which each intends to generate the income necessary to purchase this greater good.<sup>14</sup>

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