



# CNI

## **Comment - Ireland is a post-Catholic republic**

**As someone from a Northern Protestant background happily resident in Dublin, I know there is little or no point in trying to persuade my co-religionists that they should agree to do away with the border and become part of my society - writes Andy Pollack.**

I may have the nicest Irish house in the world, but the truth is that the great majority of Northern Protestants and unionists want to continue to live in their British houses, however unsympathetic their landlords are.

However I believe that in 2015 the Republic of Ireland is a good place for Protestants. In the words of former Labour Party leader Ruairi Quinn, Ireland is now a “post-Catholic pluralist republic”.

The old Roman Catholic Church which they so feared is a shadow of its former self. Priestly vocations have collapsed, graphically illustrated by the dramatically shrinking lists on the graduation boards at St Patrick's College Maynooth.

Some might say that one of the final nails in the coffin of old-fashioned, priest-ridden Irish Catholicism was the extraordinary 'Yes' vote – against the instructions of any bishop who was brave enough to oppose it – in the marriage equality referendum in May.

Garret Fitzgerald's view was that Irish society had changed more rapidly than any other society in Western Europe in recent times. Nearly 10 per cent of the population are now foreign-born, and while the influx of Poles has served to swell some Catholic congregations, immigration from the US, Africa and other regions has often done the same for Protestant churches.

The Church of Ireland and other Protestant churches are now growing again, helped both by immigrants and Catholics often disillusioned by a lack of spiritual and moral leadership (most

scandalously by child-abusing priests) in the majority church.

I would estimate that around three quarters of the worshippers at my own Unitarian Church in central Dublin are from an Irish Catholic background. Senior Church of Ireland figures such as the Dean of Christ Church Cathedral and the head of the Church of Ireland College of Education are former Catholics.

Irish Catholicism is itself becoming more 'Protestant', with far more emphasis on liberty of the individual conscience and participation by grass roots members than in the previously authoritarian institutional church.

What used to be dismissed scornfully by conservative Catholics in the 1980s as 'à la carte' Catholicism is now what many people practice: Mass attendance along with the pill; confession along with divorce; gay marriage along with the Eucharist.

In politics, the kind of kowtowing to the Catholic hierarchy that went on in the days of Eamon de Valera, John A. Costello and Sean MacBride is now utterly unthinkable.

In 2011, in an unprecedented attack by an Irish government leader, Enda Kenny accused the Vatican of downplaying the clerical rape and torture of children in the Cloyne diocese to protect the institutional church's power and reputation.

Foreign Affairs Minister Eamon Gilmore followed this by closing the Irish embassy to the Vatican as a cost-cutting measure.

These days there are a significant number of high profile southern Irish people from a Protestant background, some of them icons of Irish modernity: Bono in rock music, Katie Taylor in sport, Chief Justice Susan Denham in the law, Graham Norton in broadcasting and David Norris in sexual politics.

Two women cabinet ministers – Jan O'Sullivan and Heather Humphreys – are Protestants.

None of the above is any kind of attempt to persuade northern Protestants and unionists to give up their Britishness.

However it does lead to two suggestions: firstly, they should realise that the Republic of Ireland isn't such an alien place these days – in many ways it is an open-minded, tolerant and liberal society (indeed strikingly more so than Northern Ireland); and secondly, it wouldn't do them any harm to admit that they too have a little bit of Irishness in their make-up and it might be interesting, at the very least, to visit the South to explore that small part of themselves.

- Andy Pollak is a former Irish Times religious affairs correspondent and Belfast reporter. First published in the News Letter