CHAPTER 2

Creating a parallel state: the development of Irish civil society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries

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Introduction

This chapter examines the development of civil society in modern Ireland, in particular its roots in the establishment of a myriad of nationalist-inspired artistic, cultural, language, labour, feminist and sporting groups that blossomed in the late 19th century.[1] The first section considers the parallel between today's Ireland and that of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and why this period has some important lessons for 21st-century Ireland's community sector. We then examine the period preceding the late 19th-century growth in Irish civil society when the foundations were laid for the state–civil society struggles out of which the independent Irish state emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. This is followed by an examination of the period 1870–1923 and the creation of a virtual parallel state by Irish civil society. The chapter concludes with an examination of the role civil society could play in the development of a new, more engaged, relationship between citizens and their state.

A curious symmetry

There is a curious symmetry between the present situation and that of the late 19th century. Now, as in the 1890s, the idea that there is a gap in our democracy is gaining currency. There was then, as there is now, a growing recognition of the need to bring the governors and the gov-

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1 A period that Patrick Maume (1999) refers to as 'The Long Gestation' in Irish nationalist life.

erned into a closer, more engaged and dialogical relationship (Ward, 1994: 60–72). The solution implemented by the British government was to create representative institutions through the Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1898. The assumption was that those chosen to represent the people would be responsive to their interests, even if they did not share their actual circumstances or characteristics (Paseta, 1999: 64–6; Boyce, 1996: 41). This partial solution failed to quell the nation's desire for a more developed sense of political self-determination which found rich expression through an activist civil society.

While the circumstances of the early 21st century may, at first sight, seem very different, there are certain similarities. Now, as then, a sense of malaise at the quality and direction of Irish society is evident, even if it remains without a coherent voice or vocabulary. People who work with the most vulnerable and marginalised in Irish society feel much anger at the skewed priorities of the Irish state and the failure to invest in public services for those who have benefited little from the boom of the 1990s. Irish society remains deeply divided; its divisions are fuelling an alarming growth in violence, in part linked to a criminal economy that has taken deep root. Just as a century ago, the institutions of Irish democracy and of the Irish state seem ill-equipped to deal with this malaise, to provide a sense of direction for our society, and to begin effectively to heal some of its deep rifts. In the eyes of many, we have a political class that panders to international corporate elites and to the new moneyed dominant class that has grown up during the boom, greatly assisted by tax breaks, subsidies and myriad incentives the Irish state makes available to them. No political force has yet emerged to give voice to the malaise and so it is mostly through the initiatives of civil society organisations that needs are being voiced, power being contested and radical action taken.

Ireland is therefore at a time of transition, away from past structures and formations that were the inheritance of the struggles of a century ago, towards what we do not yet know. Now, as then, it is civil society which offers the greatest hope to be the incubator of a new social project for Irish society, one that holds the prospect of laying the foundations of greater justice, equality and sustainability. These constitute the themes of this book, critiquing the attempts to co-opt and neutralise the potential of civil society and mapping out some of the principal challenges. In examining the state–civil society struggles of a century ago, this chapter offers some practical lessons from history, reminding

Irish civil society of its historical roots and the immense achievements of an earlier era.

Setting the context 1800–69

In order to have a clearer understanding of the nature of state–civil society relationships in 19th-century Ireland, it is necessary to grasp the earlier inter-linked factors that helped shape them:

(a) a long period of Irish Catholic decline;
(b) the creation of the British state (Acts of Union 1707 and 1800);
(c) the consolidation of the 1688 settlement (constitutional monarchy and Protestant state);
(d) inter-communal strife in Ireland.

With regard to the dramatic decline in the political and economic power of Irish Catholics, Barnard notes that

> English policy aimed to eradicate Catholicism from sixteenth and seventeenth century Ireland. However, failure to do so led to a more limited although still ambitious scheme to remove its leaders. Government service was closed to those who would not profess Protestantism. Other openings—in the law, education and even skilled crafts—narrowed and sometimes closed. By the early eighteenth century, the only profession in Ireland open to Catholics was medicine (2004: 125).[2]

This process of decline was paralleled by a consolidation of Anglican power in Ireland and the continued polarisation of inter-communal relations. For example, the arrival of evangelical missionaries in the 1740s, whose '"enthusiasm" even drew the ire of Jonathan Swift' (Whelan, 2005: 5) raised several objections by many Catholics to state-funded proselytising.

With regard to the creation of the new British state, Jackson observes that the 'insistent treatment of Ireland as a British dependency'

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2 For example, in 1692 Catholics were forbidden to take seats in Parliament, in 1716 Catholic peers could no longer sit in the House of Lords, in 1729 Catholics were explicitly barred from voting in parliamentary elections, in 1733 Catholics were barred from the legal professions, and in 1745 marriages between Catholics and Protestants were outlawed. There was some reform of the franchise in 1793 when Catholics were admitted to the 40 Shilling Freeholders Register for county constituencies. However, the Irish Parliament was a 'borough-dominated assembly' and so this reform had a very limited impact (Jackson, 1999: 11).

was made possible both by the British-controlled executive and the 'peculiarly unrepresentative nature of the Irish Parliament' (1999: 7). What was particularly unusual about Ireland was not that property interests should be over-represented or that there should be a religious dimension to political rights, but 'rather that the two principles should be combined in order to exclude two powerful and wealthy confessional communities from representative politics' (ibid.). For example, of the 150 constituencies represented in the Irish House of Commons, 107 were 'close', i.e. 'under the control of an individual or a small group of patrons' (Jackson, 1999: 7). Arguably, the 1798 Rising, the Act of Union and the concurrent abolition of the Irish parliament marked 'the closing statements in a major phase of the long argument between England, the centre of imperial power, and Ireland, the recalcitrant colony' (McLoughlin, 2005: 7). By 1801 the main parameters of Irish Catholic civil society's relationship with the avowedly Anglican British state were in place but the period between then and 1869 was also one of significant change. In the years immediately following the Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland, the 'belief gained widespread currency that the native population of Ireland, like that of Wales and Scotland, could be made peaceful, industrious and loyal through scripture-based education designed to wean them from their traditional allegiance to Catholicism, preparing them for integration into the Protestant establishment of Church and State' (Whelan, 2005: xvi). This process was part of a broader movement in which Ireland, Scotland and Wales were subjected to an economic and cultural transformation, through which they were acclimatised to the 'new political and economic realities of the nineteenth century' (ibid.).

Irish Catholics' resistance to this process, often articulated by Rev. John MacHale and Daniel O'Connell, and their demands for Catholic Emancipation, and particularly their opposition to the Anglican attempts to implement this new Reformation at local level, greatly increased the political and sectarian tension of the 1820s.[3] Finlay Holmes, the noted historian of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, argues that one result was to 'sharpen Catholic hostility to Protestantism' (2000: 103). Despite the efforts of Presbyterian ministers like Hamilton Magee to condemn the 'coarse, vulgar and oftentimes most ignorant abuse of

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3 A period Whelan (2005) refers to as 'The Second Reformation', 'Protestant Crusade' or 'The Bible War in Ireland'.

popery' the movement contributed to the emergence of a new Irish national consciousness, which 'in alliance with resurgent Catholicism, identified Protestantism with Unionism and Orangeism, and English rule' (Holmes, 2000: 103). Concurrently, the 'defeat' of the Reform Act of 1832 which reduced the influence of aristocratic patrons in borough constituencies had the 'effect of releasing demotic urban Protestantism' throughout Ireland (Hoppen, 1989: 20). Working-class Protestants in Belfast, Dublin, Cork, Bandon and Youghal 'suddenly developed effective militant politics of their own' (ibid.). While prosperous Protestants retained a grasp of status, power and responsibility, many began to increasingly depend on a vested interest made up simply of 'the superiority of Protestantism itself' (Hill, 1980: 64–5). Holmes notes that while the Reform Act of 1832 marked the beginning of the 'gradual advance of democracy in Britain', in Ireland it wedded many Protestants to the Union as it 'gave them the security of knowing that they were part of the majority population of a great Protestant nation whose ethos and culture they shared' (2000: 95). These cleavages were to have a profound impact on the development of civil society in Ireland.

The period leading up to the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 also saw the development and articulation of a distinct lay Catholic perspective. The British government deemed a 'number of safeguards necessary as accompaniments to emancipation' (Ó Tuathaigh, 1990: 56). These centred on two main conditions: (1) the British government should have some form of control over the appointment of Catholic bishops and possibly of priests; and (2) the British government should provide some contribution to the payment of priests. The Irish bishops indicated their willingness to accept these conditions. However, there were significant differences of opinion between many Irish Catholics regarding these 'safeguards'. By the 1820s there was 'an increasing volume of opinion which was hostile' to the 'safeguards' as part of the Catholic settlement, particularly among the increasingly politically aware Catholic laity in Ireland. The decision by an assertive Catholic laity to oppose their bishops' willingness to compromise with the British government was a key part of the evolution of civil society in Ireland. While the story of the Catholic Church in Ireland in the first half of the 19th century is one of 'increased efficiency and unrelenting expansion' it is also the story of the development of nuanced and sometimes contested relationships within Catholicism, between bishops

and priests, and clerics and laity (Ó Tuathaigh, 1990: 56–7). This was even noted by observant visitors such as Gustave de Beaumont.[4]

If the environment in which Irish civil society developed in the 19th century was shaped by a myriad of interactions between political, demographic, religious, social, economic, linguistic and cultural change, the one aspect which 'most struck contemporaries and has exercised historians was that of population growth, its speed, its causes, and effects' (Hoppen, 1989: 34). For example, although no one could ever have denied that Catholics constituted by far the largest confessional group in Ireland, the statistics produced by the Commissioners of Public Instruction in 1834 were shocking to Protestants. The Commission found that 80.9 per cent of the population was Catholic, 10.7 per cent were members of the Church of Ireland and 8.1 per cent were members of the Presbyterian Church. The figures 'confirmed the most optimistic claims of one side and the most extreme fears of the other' (Hoppen, 1989: 60). Henceforth, no matter how much Protestants stressed their superior wealth, education and position, 'the great numerical fact now at last precisely revealed could not be overlooked' (ibid.). Its reverberations throughout the spheres of political and social activity were profound and 'the sharper edge it gave to the concepts of sectarian majority and minority furnished one of the central realities of modern Irish life' (ibid.).

In addition, the period saw the beginning of a movement to undermine the 'established' status of the Anglican Church of Ireland, in particular the payment of tithes by non-Anglicans (Boyce, 1996: 18–22; Stewart, 2001: 147). Opposition to the payment of tithes had been a feature of 'every outbreak of agrarian disorder from the eighteenth century onwards' (Ó Tuathaigh, 1990: 173) and the opposition was a 'compound of religious and economic objections' (ibid.). In terms of conscience, Catholics, Presbyterians and Quakers found it unacceptable that they should have to contribute to the maintenance of a church to which they did not belong. These conscientious factors

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4 Paralleling his friend Alexis de Tocqueville's visit to America, Gustave de Beaumont travelled through Ireland in the mid-1830s to observe its people and society. In *Ireland*, he chronicles the history of the Irish and offers up a national portrait on the eve of the Great Famine. Published to acclaim in France, *Ireland* remained in print there until 1914. In a devastating critique of British policy in Ireland, Beaumont questioned why a government with such enlightened institutions tolerated such oppression. He was scathing in his depiction of the ruinous state of Ireland, noting the desperation of the Catholics, the misery of repeated famines, the unfair landlord system, and the faults of the aristocracy.

severely aggravated the basic economic objections on which the opposition to tithes was chiefly based. Tithes were a tax on the produce of the land and if not paid could lead to the seizure of property. By the 1830s grievances against tithes were widespread and intense. The British government reacted by providing soldiers and police to protect tithe assessors and process servers, and to keep order at tithe seizures and auctions. Violent clashes occurred. For example, in the summer of 1831 a nervous magistrate ordered the local yeomanry to shoot at a crowd gathered at a tithe auction in Newtownbarry in County Wexford, and 12 people were killed. Later in the year, there were 17 deaths at a clash in Castlepollard in County Westmeath. In December 1831, 12 policemen and a tithe assessor were killed by locals in Carrickshock in County Kilkenny. While the tithe issue was partially resolved by legislative measures in the mid-1830s its very existence remained a divisive issue for years to come.

The tithe conflict also contributed to the engendering of the revolution in political consciousness among Irish Catholics and strengthened the Catholic Church as an institution. As the Commission of Public Instruction published their findings, the institutional life of Catholicism was emerging from the many constraints and penalties imposed by the Penal Laws that had combined 'both an only-partially effective attempt to constrain religious practice and a more heartfelt effort to deprive Catholics of landed and political influence' (Hoppen, 1989: 61). By the 1830s, 26 bishops provided an increasingly active leadership and communications with Rome were 'frequent and brisk' (ibid.). Though caution remained the order of the day as regards relations with the British government, a new confidence and self-assurance were slowly establishing themselves. For example, by the early 1850s large and expensive cathedrals had been built, or were in the process of construction, in Carlow, Dublin, Belfast, Killarney, Ballina, Tuam, Ennis, Longford, Armagh and Kilkenny.

These trends were further consolidated by the passing of the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act in 1838, which led to major administrative reform at local level and prompted Catholic religious orders to provide relief, and the Charitable Bequest Act, 1844 which legitimised bequests to Catholic charities and social action groups. Concurrently the Catholic Church furthered its social action programme with:

(a) the introduction of new religious orders, e.g. the Redemptorists, Passionists and Sisters of Mercy, and lay groups,

e.g. Society of St Vincent de Paul;
(b) the opening of new hospitals, e.g. Mater and St John of God;
(c) the opening of new schools for the emerging Catholic middle class, e.g. Blackrock and Terenure;
(d) the opening of schools by the Christian Brothers and Presentation Brothers.[5]

Despite the horrendous human and social cost of the Famine, Irish Catholics had by the 1860s consolidated their position and halted the seemingly interminable economic and political decline. By the time the Irish Church Act received royal assent on 26 July 1869 under Gladstone's 'masterly guidance' the tenuous outlines of the emerging Irish civil society could be discerned (Acheson, 2002: 200). These included strained inter-communal relationships, a confident Catholic Church, a demoralised and disestablished Anglican Church, a confident Catholic middle class, and a contested relationship between the British state and Irish Catholics.

Creating a parallel state, 1870–1923

The disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869 opened an important vacuum at the heart of Irish civil society that was quickly filled by a resurgent Catholic Church. But, unlike the religious establishment that it replaced which was very dependent on its close links with the colonial state, the strength of the Catholic Church lay rather in an emerging and ever more confident civil society then making new spaces for itself. The half century from 1870 saw this civil society begin to challenge the dominance of the colonial establishment, socially, politically, culturally and even economically, and then begin to replace it, establishing many of the institutions that were to become the foundations of the independent Irish state that came into existence in December 1922. The Irish case therefore represents what, by international standards, is a remarkably rich example of the success of civil society activism in creating the conditions for the emergence of a radically different form of state, one much more representative of the majority of the population. How this happened holds many lessons for the new situation in which Irish civil society finds itself today, caught

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5 By the early 1820s nuns and teaching brothers provided 70 schools for the middle classes, 352 free day schools and 9,352 pay schools (Hoppen, 1989: 62–3).

in the dilemma of whether to accommodate itself to the tight embrace of a state which is ever more clearly serving the interests of corporate capital (particularly foreign capital) while neglecting those of its more vulnerable citizens, or to break loose in order to contest both the actions and the nature of that state. In this section we trace the history of the transformation wrought by Irish civil society in the half century prior to independence before drawing out some lessons for civil society today.

The first spaces to be filled were political as the new Irish middle class, predominantly but not entirely Catholic, became convinced that their interests lay in Home Rule. While O'Connell had championed this cause in the 1830s and 1840s through a politics of mass mobilisation, the new economic conditions of post-Famine Ireland saw the emergence of an institutionalised political movement gaining 60 MPs in the 1874 general election and forming a separate Home Rule party at Westminster under the leadership of Isaac Butt. In the 1880s, this movement grew more militant under the leadership of Charles Stewart Parnell and came to forge closer links with the emerging civil society, including the Catholic clergy, but most significantly with leaders of the agrarian struggle some of whom, like Michael Davitt, were veterans of the Fenians. These tactics helped to establish Home Rule firmly on the agenda of British politics where it was finally achieved after the third Home Rule Bill of 1912.

Meanwhile, the Parnell split had severely weakened the leadership of the Irish Parliamentary Party among the ranks of civil society and opened spaces for new political struggles to emerge. These took various forms in response to the needs of different constituencies but the two decades from the Parnell split to the eve of the First World War saw a broadening of the political activism of sectors of Irish civil society far beyond the constitutional agenda of Home Rule. The Irish Trades Union Congress, based on its British namesake, was founded in 1894, signalling the emergence of a distinct, and at times very militant, workers' movement the importance of which tended to be later elided as the nationalist struggle for independence took centre stage. The second Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 provided an important occasion for nationalist mobilisation when leaders as diverse as Arthur Griffith, James Connolly, William Butler Yeats and Maud Gonne came together in the Irish Transvaal Committee in support of the struggle of the Boers against the British, seeing in it a parallel nationalist struggle

to that of the Irish. The great majority of Irish men who fought in the war did so on the British side, but two Irish brigades went out to support the Boers. In this political ferment two new political parties were founded, Sinn Féin in 1905 and the Labour Party in 1912. Both were to go on to play key roles in the new state that finally emerged.

While the opening of these new political spaces through civil society activism is a familiar one, a parallel activism in the economic sphere is not sufficiently appreciated. Already in the 1880s, Horace Plunkett was founding co-operatives in rural Ireland, including creameries and credit societies. These were brought together in the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS) in 1894 and by 1904 there were 778 societies affiliated to it, indicating its broad impact on rural society. In her analysis of the co-operative movement, Tovey emphasises that its aims went beyond simple economic improvement to embrace wider goals of individual empowerment and the regeneration of rural society. While efforts were made to get the support of the state, both financially and in policy terms, she argues that 'the co-operative movement was nevertheless a movement which wanted to bypass state power, in favour of empowering agrarian social groups within their own local relationships' (Tovey, 2001: 328). She sums up:

> It articulated a distinctively agrarian "project for modernity", based on the vision of a relatively uniform small-scale producer society, organised around independent, productive and efficient family farms, which remained the core ideology of most Irish farmer organisations, inside or outside the co-operative movement, up to the 1960s at least (ibid. 336).

In a predominantly rural society, this entailed nothing less than laying the economic and social foundations for a project of equitable and sustainable development.

In 1906, in a similar attempt to rejuvenate Irish industrial life, the Irish Industrial Development Association (IIDA) was founded, grouping associations in Cork, Belfast, Dublin, Galway and Derry. The IIDA sought to promote Irish manufactured goods through the Irish national trade mark (Déanta in Éirinn) which it registered, by pressuring shopkeepers to stock Irish-made goods, by persuading manufacturers to improve the quality of their products, by the production of trade data and by lobbying for direct shipping links with overseas markets. The IAOS and the IIDA indicate the broad and practical economic concerns of the activist civil society of the period, bypassing the state

in a form of what can be called 'self-help' politics.

This ever more intense wave of political and economic activism took place amid a ferment of cultural creativity that was radically changing the ways most Irish people saw themselves. While attention is often devoted to what might be regarded as more elitist dimensions of this activity, such as the Abbey Theatre, it must be remembered that the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was founded as early as 1884 and by 1902 it had adopted the provincial structure it still has today, indicating its swift spread around the country. Strongly linked from the beginning with nationalist politics, the GAA must be regarded as one of the most remarkable and enduring expressions of the civil society activism of the period. By contrast, the Gaelic League, which was founded in 1893 to revive Irish as the vernacular language of the country, initially achieved a broad-based following but became a shadow of its former self in the post-independence period. This decline, however, must not obscure the fact that the League had a profoundly formative influence on many of the leaders of the 1916 Rising and was very successful in making the Irish language a central part of the identity of the independent Irish state when it was founded. Furthermore, the League's promotion of Irish as a compulsory requirement for entry to the National University of Ireland (NUI) following its establishment in 1908 brought it into serious conflict with the Catholic bishops who feared this might act as a disincentive to Catholic students who might choose Trinity College instead of the new university. When in 1909 the bishops sacked Fr Michael O'Hickey, the Professor of Irish in Maynooth, for supporting the League's view, 100,000 people took to the streets of Dublin in his support. A year later, the Senate of the NUI opted to make Irish compulsory for matriculation from 1913 onwards. As Mathews puts it: 'On the surface this was a debate about education policy; however, at a deeper level this was a dispute about the fundamentals of national identity' (Mathews, 2003: 27).

The founding of the women's organisation, Inghinidhe na hÉireann (IÉ) in 1900 as a nationalist response to the visit of Queen Victoria that year is a reminder that Irish civil society of the time was not entirely male dominated. IÉ was both an educational and a lobbying organisation, producing a newspaper *Bean na hÉireann* and going against both the Catholic Church and the nationalist party when it supported the introduction of school means tests in 1908. It supported women's suffrage as well as nationalist causes and many of the leading civil society

women activists of the period were members. In 1914, it merged with the more overtly political organisation Cumann na mBan.

An important characteristic of the civil society activism of the time was the publication of newspapers. Mention has been made of *Bean na hÉireann* but most of the new movements and organisations had their own newspapers among them *An Claidheamh Soluis* (the Gaelic League, weekly), *Irish Homestead* (Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, weekly), Griffith's *The United Irishman* (which pre-dated the founding of Sinn Féin, weekly), and the *Workers' Republic* (Irish Socialist Republican Party, founded and edited by James Connolly, irregular). Other influential publications included Moran's *The Leader* (giving influential expression to the new ideology of an 'Irish Ireland' but in polemical and narrow terms, weekly), and the *All-Ireland Review* (edited by Standish O'Grady who was described by Lady Gregory as a 'fenian unionist' (Mulhall, 1999: 109)). This testifies to a lively intellectual culture of pluralist public and political debate, in marked contrast to the absence of such a culture in contemporary Ireland where a narrow orthodoxy of consensual ideas dominates the media and public debate.

While there has been a tendency to view these various civil society movements as separate from one another, it is interesting that this is not how they were seen at the time. For example, in his 1904 book *Ireland in the New Century*, Horace Plunkett links the co-operative and the industrial movement with the literary and artistic movements of the day and states that the book's aim is to clarify 'the essential unity of the various progressive movements in Ireland' (quoted in Tovey, 2001: 328). Tovey summarises the central objectives of this multifaceted civil society activism as follows:

> At the close of the 19th century, the failure of demands for even limited political independence created a situation in which other forms of independent development and autonomy became [all] the more important—linguistic and cultural, literary, organisational and administrative, and economic. The co-operative movement, like the Gaelic League and the Sinn Féin movement of Arthur Griffith, saw the political vacuum of the period as an opportunity to create social, cultural and economic structures which would enable Ireland to take some control of its own future development, whether formally under British colonial rule or not (ibid. 328).

This quote also rightly identifies the fact that the shared objective was to develop the capacity of society to take control of its own future. To this extent, it was an essentially empowering social movement,

very comparable to those that have captured the imagination in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia in our times. Indeed, some of those active in these movements were unionist in their politics and so were not seeking to replace the colonial state. Yet a consequence of this social activism was that foundations were laid of many institutions that later became central to the new independent Irish state, as Mathews recognises:

> Significantly, by 1908 the major cultural, political, and educational institutions of the 'post-British Irish state'—the Gaelic League, the Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, and the National University of Ireland—had all been established, largely due to the efforts of the revivalists and with little help from mainstream politicians. With the development of these national institutions and the emergence of a new wave of nationalist newspapers, an infrastructure was put in place which allowed the 'imagining' of the Irish nation (Mathews, 2003: 10).

If a new Irish state emerged from the civil society activism of the half-century that preceded 1922, it is paradoxical that the advent of independence marked the decline of that activism. Some of it may be due to the disillusion brought by the divisions of the Treaty debate and the subsequent civil war. But it was also due to a belief that the new state would now take up many of the causes previously championed by civil society. With very few exceptions, the civil society organisations active in the new state remained very dependent on the state, both ideologically and materially. It needs to be acknowledged also that the state, particularly after Fianna Fáil emerged as its dominant party from 1932 onwards, developed a very effective ability to nip emerging dissent in the bud and to co-opt civil society organisations into a benign but disempowering embrace. Civil society lost the capacity to act as incubator of new social and political projects as it had done in the period between 1870 and 1920.

A rediscovered role for Irish civil society

What, then, are the lessons of this extensive civil society activism for today? The first is the point made by Mathews at the end of the quote above. This is that, at heart, it was an achievement of imagination, namely the re-imagining of what constituted the Irish nation or, to put it in terms that might be more readily used today, the national community. A century earlier, the term the 'Irish nation' was understood to mean

the Protestant nation which, in the late 18th century, had struggled for a measure of legislative independence from Britain. A century later, the term 'Irish nation' had come to mean something entirely different and it referred to a far wider section of the Irish population, mostly but not exclusively Catholic in religion, but predominantly nationalist in politics (whether supporting Home Rule or complete separation from Britain). This fundamental shift resulted by and large from the actions of sectors of Irish civil society, most especially through education. A sense of separateness was developed through an alternative reading of history and through various cultural activities that flowed from that—music, dance, sport and language. In other words, people came to see the community to which they belonged in a new way, fostering a sense of what Benedict Anderson called 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991). While this is usually understood to refer to cultural and political nationalism, the relevance for our day is wider.

Irish society has, certainly over the past century, been characterised by intense debates about identity: who are we as a people and what constitutes our distinctiveness?[6] A new feature of these debates today refers to what are sometimes called 'the new Irish', namely those who have recently immigrated to live in Ireland. Among these are some who are learning the Irish language and indeed earning a living through the language (as teachers, journalists or academic researchers, for example). In these ways, the notion of Irishness that came to dominance through the civil society struggles a century ago is again being questioned and a reconsideration of who constitutes the national community is necessary. In a less recognised way, however, the exclusionary nature of Ireland's recent economic growth, with its growing gap between rich and poor, is also challenging the sense of belonging to Irish society that was taken for granted for much of the 20th century. One manifestation of this is the growth of violent crime and the clear breakdown of a cohesive sense of community. It is primarily the organisations of the community and voluntary sector which are working with these excluded groups (both the 'new Irish' and the poor Irish, sometimes the same people, sometimes not), seeking to integrate them into existing society, often with meagre resources from the state.

What is again required in this situation is a fundamental re-imag-

6 At the time of writing (spring 2008), RTÉ was broadcasting yet another series on this subject, entitled *The Importance of being Irish*.

ining of who constitutes the Irish national community, not in some glib rhetorical way but in a way that changes the policy priorities of public bodies and the spending of the resources generated by the Irish economy. The act of reimagining will not in itself change policies but, just as it was necessary a hundred years ago, so today it is a necessary first step to mounting a serious challenge to the priorities of public policy and to the politics that constitute them. In other words, generating a cultural ferment of debate and representation is a necessary condition for the sort of fundamental political change required in Ireland if the values and priorities of organised sectors of today's civil society (within the institutions of social partnership, for example) are to find expression in state policies and actions. Central to this cultural ferment must be a much more determined contestation of state actions (and the actions of dominant elites of Irish society) just as characterised civil society a hundred years ago.

If one of the lessons of a century ago is the importance of the task of re-imagining the national community, a second is the need to use creatively the spaces that open up. This section began by making reference to the space opened by the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869; another space was opened by the establishment of the NUI in 1908. Reference has also been made to the political space opened by the creation of a structure of local government in 1899, providing many nationalist politicians with the opportunity to learn administrative and electoral skills. Another space opened by the colonial state that was used by civil society was the establishment of the Congested Districts Board in 1891. According to Harvey (2007) this was staffed by some of the leading Victorian social reformers who, in the face of strong political opposition, invested in rural co-operatives. Committees were established in every parish, community organisers were appointed to lead the organisational development of districts and community-based nursing services were introduced. Paradoxically, one of the first decisions of the independent Irish state was to abolish the Congested Districts Board. Harvey explains why: 'With the exception of Michael Davitt, Irish nationalist members of Parliament had never liked the board, for it by-passed their patronage and the co-operative movement which it promoted angered their wealthier political supporters' (Harvey, 2007: 8). These examples show the creative ability of different actors in civil society to use the opportunities available to challenge the status quo of the day.

In our day some new spaces have also opened up through which civil society has a voice. Since the mid 1990s, social partnership has dominated and structured the relationship between civil society organisations and the state. A decade of social partnership has, however, left many civil society activists frustrated and feeling co-opted into a state-dominated political project that serves very few of the objectives of civil society, except rhetorically. With the end of the Celtic Tiger, a space is opening that offers challenging new opportunities for civil society. For, as economic decline begins to hit and Irish people face once again the difficulties of unemployment and low growth rates, a new sense of realism has entered the national debate, allowing a more critical reassessment of the lost opportunities of the boom and the huge deficits it has left. This provides new terrain where the critical voice of civil society can find a resonance. It is also significant that, at long last, some serious reform of local government is being proposed. In Latin America, it was such reforms in the 1990s that opened space for the new parties of the left to cut their teeth, gain administrative experience, and broaden their base of support. For many, municipal power provided the platform from which to gain power at national level. For the leaders of Irish civil society, who aspire to a more just and equitable society, the direct election of mayors and the greater powers (including tax raising powers) that are being discussed for Irish local government, provide a space through which to address the huge challenges that lie ahead. This offers the possibility that civil society could again become the incubator of a new social and political project for Irish society if it could rediscover the creativity, independence of spirit and ambitious sense of national purpose that characterised it a century ago.