

## Five minutes with Elaine Byrne: “Legislative change requires public mindsets to change, evidence based research and a willingness by policy makers to countenance reform”

by Blog Admin

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*Proving that the public can be trusted to deliberate on complex policy issues, **Elaine Byrne**'s 'We the Citizens' project re-engaged voters with the political process. She Here, she talks of her impact on the formation of policy, and how she is challenging ideas of citizen engagement... all while dealing with journalists waiting outside her office door.*



**Last year, you and some colleagues launched the ‘We the Citizens’ campaign which promoted valuable citizen engagement with government through discussion moderated by academia. How did the idea for this campaign come about?**

My weekly politics column for the Irish Times, which ran from 2008 to 2011, focused on contemporary Irish politics and political reform. I was sitting down to write my final column for 2009 when Prof Michael Marsh emailed me a Guardian column on the Icelandic Citizens Assembly process. The article began a fascination with citizens’ assemblies and the idea of deliberative democracy became a regular theme. The response was incredible.

My editor at the time, Peter Murtagh, came up with an idea for a series of articles in the Irish Times called “Reclaiming the Republic”. We worked together on this in March and April of 2010 to bring different voices on political reform to the Irish Times opinion pages. This included the incredible Baroness Helena Kennedy who wrote about the UK’s Power2010 campaign.

Ireland’s flagship current affairs programme, RTE Primetime, commissioned me to do a report from Iceland on its response to the economic crisis. Then, Fine Gael, (the party then in opposition, now in coalition government) requested advice on their political reform manifesto and how deliberative democracy could work in an Irish context.

The academic community, particularly in politics, economics and law, were also becoming a more regular and influential feature of public life through blogs like [Irish Economy](#) and Dr Eoin O’Malley, Dr Jane Suiter, Dr Matt Wall, Prof David Farrell and I then worked together to create our [political reform blog](#) which came

into its own from the summer of 2010.

Dr Séin O'Muineacháin and I hosted the Irish parliament's Joint Committee on the Constitution to sit in the university and hear submissions by our Irish politics class on political reform. One of the key recommendations of that Committee was the introduction of a citizens' assembly to deliberate on electoral reform

[David, Eoin, Jane and I](#) met with Atlantic Philanthropies in July 2010 and from there we were invited to submit a proposal on a deliberative democracy project for Ireland. We spent the next few months drafting the proposal which was formally accepted that November.

Our project differed from our original plans in three respects. On a very practical level, the intervention by the IMF in Ireland in November 2010 meant that Ireland was characterised by several months of political instability. We were wary about our project becoming part of a politicised general election campaign which meant that we decided to delay our project until after the February 2011 election. This shortened the time we had anticipated for the project by a few months. Our original proposal had envisaged hosting deliberative events with the Irish emigrant community in New York and Australia. We had also hoped to host an event in Northern Ireland. The timing and parameters of the project changed which is the prerogative of most projects!

**The Irish government have welcomed the findings of the 'We the Citizens' report in December 2011. How would you like this research to affect Irish policymaking?**

The answer to that question is very much dependent on the forthcoming government announcement (in March apparently) on a Constitutional Convention! Our project demonstrated that deliberative democracy works. Citizens can be trusted to deliberate on complex policy issues. The polling evidence in our final report shows that people's opinions shifted when presented with evidence and time to deliberate on issues.

The strength of our project was the representative character of the citizens involved which encompassed people from all walks of life in terms of age, gender, geography and socio-economic background. I hope the Constitutional Convention will have a citizens' assembly component which will travel around the country rather than a forum for civil society organisations, unions and bodies representing various interests which is what we had with Social Partnership during the Celtic Tiger years. I also hope that the anticipated Constitutional Convention will have some meat to it in the sense that the topics for discussion will be meaningful and that the decisions as a consequence of the process will be implemented.

**You haven't confined your work to Irish government, and have given evidence to the UK's Select Committee on standards in public life. How did you find that experience?**

I had the opportunity to give written and oral evidence to the Committee in 2010. I enjoyed the opportunity to engage with the issue of political funding in a different jurisdiction. I've published twenty or thirty articles on the corrosive impact of unorthodox donations within Irish politics for several years.

Legislative change requires public mindsets to change, evidence based research and a willingness by policy makers to countenance reform. There's no point in writing newspaper articles unless policy makers take them into consideration and likewise, legislative change gains public legitimacy when decision makers engage with the public in different types of forums. For reform to happen, all these methods of engagement go hand in hand.

**Do you feel that your evidence may have had an impact on the committee's findings, of even way of thinking?**

Sir Christopher Kelly's report, "[Political party finance: Ending the big donor culture](#)" contained four key recommendations which replicated current practice in Ireland but these proved very controversial in the UK and the report was buried before it came up for air. From an Irish perspective, the response by the public and political parties to the report was amusing. We've had these measures for over ten years and the world did not cave in.

There are other areas where my work on political donations had an impact last year. The second report of the controversial government appointed Moriarty Tribunal into corruption and payments to politicians was published in 2011. The start of the report contained a couple of verbatim paragraphs from a column I wrote on the Tribunal process. My Sunday Business Post article on the Moriarty Report resulted in an invitation by the Council of Europe, Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO), to address their representatives, evaluators and the secretariat on corruption prevention. My Sunday Independent column last October on Fine Gael's response to that Tribunal also received considerable public attention. It also caught the attention of Ireland's wealthiest businessman, Denis O'Brien, who was the subject of the article and he issued legal correspondence as a consequence.

**What effects has your use of digital media had on both your professional and personal life?**

My engagement with the public is part of my job description because I'm obliged to have a foot in both worlds given that I'm an adjutant lecturer and a political columnist. Sometimes it can be very difficult to combine the two as both worlds

are very different to one another, particularly in how media perceives academia and vice-versa. That was encapsulated for me when I asked an academic colleague recently for his views on a column I was writing which had a very tight deadline. “Can you not write something along the lines of on-the-one-hand and on-the-other-hand?” he asked. I told him that the purpose of an opinion column was that I didn’t have this luxury as I had to have an opinion and he responded, “Every week?!”

Academia and media have different expectations and don’t often understand the restraints within each in terms of time, reputation and output. Sometimes it can be challenging to maintain job security as each requires not only a considerable time commitment but vastly different approaches and methods of communicating.

At times I see my media role as that of a translator, to distil extensive intellectual research into concise 800 word articles for public consumption.

Twitter has been a terrific tool to disseminate research, build networks and observe how media, academia and the public perceived different issues, differently. I have approximately 6,500 followers though the perception of being accessible can be time consuming. At one point last year I was getting over 100 emails a week [through my website](#) with requests for international and national media interviews, invitations to speak at public events and comments from the public (positive and negative!) on my work. From a time management perspective, it is simply impossible to engage with everything and last year was a learning curve on what to commit to. I remember going into work one day and reporters from national Spanish TV and Radio had managed to find my office and were hanging out waiting for me to turn up!

I have greater awareness now of balancing both worlds and have enjoyed the last six months which have been spent away from media and more on substantial writing.

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