

Book Review: Political Corruption in Ireland 1922-2010: A Crooked Harp?

by Blog Admin

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This book empirically maps the decline in standards since the inauguration of Irish independence in 1922, to the loss of Irish economic sovereignty in 2010, offering important perspectives on corruption theory. Elaine A. Byrne argues that the definition of corruption is an evolving one and that the Irish party system, political culture, and media have all influenced the character of Irish corruption. Bizarre case studies will be of use to historians and political scientists, writes Jason Brock.



Political Corruption in Ireland 1922-2010: A Crooked Harp? Elaine A. Byrne.
Manchester University Press. March 2012.

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Given Ireland's proximity – in more than simply geographical terms – I am often surprised at how little attention Irish politics seems to receive in the British media, save where it is thrust into the spotlight through the lens of Northern Ireland or the European Union. One of the more mundane consequences of this only-occasional coverage is the tendency of London-based newsreaders to mispronounce the names of political parties in Ireland, but I think there are also more serious reasons for thinking that greater media engagement with the country's affairs is desirable. In this sense, I feel that more books like Elaine Byrne's should be welcomed.

Byrne's study of Irish political corruption takes the years from independence in 1922 through to "the loss of economic sovereignty" (p. 1) in 2010 as its chronology. This strikes me as both a sensible and convenient span to cover, although extending to such a recent year creates a few challenges to the historical methodology. Having said that, the book feels more like the work of a political scientist than that of a historian, although I stress that one should not read any pretensions into this comment. There have been few systematic studies of political corruption in the Western world and Byrne tackles a particularly interesting phenomenon in the Irish case since, as she points out, "although the Irish public mind is perhaps convinced that corruption is a prevailing feature of political life, there has been almost no empirical investigation into the veracity of this assumption" (p. 1).

Any study of corruption must tackle a few key issues, such as the extent to which corruption is the result of individual abuse of power or is instead of a more institutional character (or perhaps somewhere in between; "a few bad apples", so to speak). These questions throw up certain methodological issues as to how to approach the topic and Byrne has opted for mixing a chronological and thematic structure. This works well in general, but I do think there would have been a strong case for taking a purer thematic model. At the heart of the book is a concern with tackling the existing definitions of what constitutes corruption. Byrne advocates a new definition, mediated corruption, that goes beyond the standard assumption of private (typically financial) gain towards an acknowledgement that other, less explicit, gains such as "power, prestige and symbolic capital" (p. 13) must be given emphasis too. The book as a whole serves as a kind of extended case study for this new definition, some readers simply dipping into the book for a particular example – as a student may well do – could miss this deeper purpose.

Byrne initially explores why there was so little corruption in the first years of the Irish Free State, pointing out that it did not follow the natural inclination of distributing political patronage amongst supporters of the freedom struggle and instead followed a path of laying down meritocratic principles. It is, however, the chapter on the 1950s to 1970s, which Byrne describes as a crossroads, that I would like to highlight. These years were important for Ireland; more people came to live in urban rather than rural areas and the arrival of modernity changed perceptions of public life and politics. The demographic shift required a considerable increase in construction work and this created the conditions for corruption to occur. Byrne writes of one especially amusing case where a Fianna Fáil supporter with connections to the Minister for Local Government promised to aid a building firm seeking planning permission in exchange for what amounted to a bribe before suing the firm when they failed to pay the full “fee”. Beyond this slightly bizarre case, there were a number of corruption allegations relating to planning decisions but with the situation in Northern Ireland dominating the political agenda there was less emphasis on tribunal investigations than had been the case in the 1930s and 1940s. Increasingly professionalised and competitive electoral politics also necessitated greater fundraising, and Byrne tells us briefly about Fianna Fáil’s establishment of TACA in the 1960s as an organ facilitating networking between political and economic elites. The body was fairly short-lived but its demise saw the corresponding development of more discrete ways of fundraising. It would have been interesting to have seen Byrne develop these points more fully and her own views on the relationship between party funding and corruption in this period are not explicit.

With this in mind, I would like to briefly mention the chapter on political funding from the 1980s to 2010. This is also, of course, a resonant issue today in many democratic countries, not least in the UK. Byrne explores whether Fianna Fáil’s reliance on funds from the beef industry in the 1980s and the construction industry thereafter had an impact on its policy decisions in government. Some of Byrne’s conclusions in this chapter could have been expounded more clearly, but she does point out that as individual politicians rather than parties themselves are increasingly becoming the recipients of major donations the “opportunity structures for illicit influence may increase” (p. 198). Moreover, Byrne highlights the fact that the Fianna Fáil and Green coalition government failed to task the Nyberg Commission, appointed in 2011 to investigate banking, with examining political decisions regarding financial regulation and policy as part of its remit

All in all, it is quite difficult to do justice to the scope and level of detail found in Byrne’s book in a short review. There are limitations, with my main reservation being that, bar the introductory and concluding chapters, the author’s own argument and opinion is not presented in sharp enough focus. I suspect that the work will not be much thumbed by undergraduates and rather that the main academic audience will be political scientists interested in its case studies of corruption, although there is more than enough here to be of use to historians interested in the specific examples used. Since its publication, the work has garnered considerable media attention, including a number of [positive reviews in newspapers and popular publications](#). Byrne’s study has found a broader audience beyond academia, and this should be commended, but most of all we should praise the way in which it has helped to stimulate a broader debate on political corruption in European democracies.

Jason Brock is a PhD candidate and Visiting Tutor in the Department of History at Royal Holloway, University of London. His thesis is a study of J.A. Hobson’s economic and political thought and he is more broadly interested in the history of economic ideas and political economy. Jason currently teaches undergraduate and postgraduate classes in modern British and European history as well as the history of political thought and the philosophy of history. [Read more reviews by Jason.](#)