

Pastoral Statement of the Catholic Bishops of Ireland on the Upcoming General Election 18 February 2016

A general election is an important moment which offers a democratic society an opportunity to reflect on its successes and failures. In Ireland we are fortunate to live in a lively democratic society, even with all its imperfections. Democracy requires in the first place that all citizens exercise their right to vote and we strongly encourage all to vote in the up-coming election.

Democracy however is not limited to voting. Democracy is fundamentally about people working and walking together to foster the common good. Democracy is damaged by indifference and by a splintering of society or a fixation on individual interests. A general election is a moment in which all citizens, and not just political parties, should reflect and take stock of the health of the nation and especially on how we respond to the plight of the most vulnerable.

Democracy flourishes when it is rooted in a shared social ethic. To succeed, good social policy requires economic stability and sustained growth. But economic growth on its own does not necessarily generate social equity. Social equity has a logic of its own which must be worked on to achieve its aim. Our comparatively wealthy Ireland has still a long path to travel in this task.

We share the anxiety of many citizens in Ireland at the fact that there is an uncertain social climate in the country regarding vital sectors of people's lives, especially regarding health, homes, education, security, the fostering of a solid human ecology, and international responsibility.

Health: Most people feel great unease about the current health care system. They worry about what would happen to them if they became ill. They worry about the health of their children. They worry about what would happen to their parents and other elderly people should they become ill. They are worried about the cost of health care. They are worried about the quality of health care, including mental health care. Successive governments have presented a variety of solutions and in so many cases they have either failed or have not been implemented. A blame game is not the answer. Ireland's health crisis is the result of a fundamental failure of politics.

Home: there is a crisis of homelessness, not just of those who sleep rough on our streets, but of those who are housed in inadequate and precarious accommodation especially in hotel rooms totally unsuitable for children and families. All recognise that providing adequate and affordable social housing is an essential pillar of any solution. Some more recent social housing has been poor in quality. Private rental accommodation is scarce and property market dealings are even reducing the available pool.

Education: This General election takes place on the anniversary of the 1916 Rising and the Proclamation of a Republic which set out to cherish all the children of the nation equally. There has been much discussion about inequality in access to education. We are a young country and we will urgently need more and more new schools for the future. The real inequality in Irish schools is not religious in nature but it is the economic inequality where poorer communities and schools with a large percentage of disadvantaged children are not being adequately supported. Ireland is still marred by neglect of children and of lack of opportunity for the children of the most deprived and groups such as Travellers.

Security: Citizens can only exercise their rights fully if they live within an overall climate of security. The most fundamental obligation of the State is the protection of its citizens. Recent

killings on the streets of Ireland have shocked all of us. These are not simply about gangland feuds; they are the product of a criminal industry of death which unscrupulously floods our streets and our children with drugs. It is an “industry” which destroys young lives daily and which fosters even broader criminality. People feel insecure in their homes both in rural and urban communities. They will willingly support policies which will strengthen An Garda Síochána.

Human ecology: Pope Francis speaks often of climate change. But he also speaks of a “human ecology”. Austerity is not a popular word but there is another kind of austerity, that of simplicity in life-style in harmony with nature, through which all of us indicate where our real values lie, rather than in the empty values of consumerism and a rush for the superfluous. Families deserve much greater support in their work in fostering and transmitting values. A true human ecology recognises the equal right to life of every person from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. The *Constitution of Ireland* embraces the right to life of the unborn child. It is a fundamental affirmation of equality, where the right to life of no child is considered of less value than that of another. We strongly oppose any weakening of the affirmation of the right to life of the unborn.

International responsibility: Ireland is an island nation but not an isle of isolation. We belong within a world community. Ireland’s missionary past is a clear indication of the deep concern of the people of Ireland for the progress of peoples worldwide. As a traditionally emigrant country we share a historical memory of how our emigrants were received or at times rejected in the lands to which they moved. Now it is the time for us to reciprocate the experience of openness by welcoming to our communities people who flee from persecution, from economic exclusion or from religious discrimination. Despite economic challenges Ireland can and must maintain its commitments in international life especially recent commitments to finance development and to combat climate change.

The believer in Jesus Christ cannot separate his or her understanding of responsibility in and for society from those criteria of judgment which are set out in the Gospel:

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Mt 25:35–36).

The Christian in politics and in society cannot renounce his or her special responsibility to protect the weak and the marginalised. This responsibility cannot be delegated or suppressed to party interests or emptied into the language of spin. Politics is not just the art of the possible; it is a vocation where the interests of all citizens should be respected and where the respect and trust of citizens will only be won by honesty and integrity.

As bishops we encourage all citizens to engage with and challenge their local candidates about their commitment to the questions we have indicated, and about their understanding of politics as truly working and walking together to foster the common good.

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