

# Austerity Ireland: Europe open your eyes

[www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/austerity-ireland-europe-open-your-eyes](http://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/austerity-ireland-europe-open-your-eyes)

Silke Trommer

Europe must stop lauding Ireland as a success story and instead recognise the damage done to Irish society by the harsh austerity politics inflicted upon her.



Anti-austerity protest Dublin, 2012. William Murphy/ Flickr. Some rights reserved.

On a wet and windy winter evening in December 2015, a crowd of 1,000 people gathers around a doorstep in Dublin's city centre, a stone's throw from the Irish parliament. A representative of the Irish traveling community, a group of under 65,000 people that has long been fighting unsuccessfully for official recognition as an ethnic minority, enters the stage. The woman reluctantly explains that she is not a good public speaker. The crowd nonetheless breaks into cheer when she emphatically declares: "Europe has to see now what's going on, they really do have to see what's going on."

The scene raises the question of what it is that Europe has to see 'going on' in the Republic of Ireland in the winter of 2015/16? Official statistics draw the picture of a sizeable economic recovery. After eight austerity budgets since 2008 and an €85 billion EU/IMF bailout programme in 2010, the Republic of Ireland presents a 7% growth rate in 2015, making it the EU's best performing economy for two consecutive years.

Nominal income exceeds that of 2014 by €20 billion and public debt is [predicted](#) to sink below the 100% GDP mark. The American Chambers of Commerce [announced](#) in December 2015 that US multinationals are expected to create an additional 14,000 jobs in Ireland over the next two years. Those relying on government statistics and mainstream media reports might ask "What's not to like?"

Yet, the figures pass over the harsh social realities that characterise Ireland's recovery in the winter of 2015/16. The 1,000 gathered on 1 December because two years ago on this day, a homeless man, Jonathan Corrie, was found dead on a doorstep located less than 100 metres away from the Irish

parliament building. His tragic death has become emblematic for a national housing crisis of extortionate dimensions.

Charity organisations [estimate](#) that close to 3,463 adults and 1,638 children are currently homeless across the Republic of Ireland. This represents a 25% increase in overall homelessness when compared to the 2011 Special Census [Report](#) on Homeless Persons. In Dublin in particular, 70 to 80 families lose their homes every month, with rent supplements lagging behind a 20% increase in rents [since 2013](#) and Ireland exposing the [highest number](#) of households in late-stage mortgage arrears in Europe.

More broadly speaking, the country not only tops the European ranks for economic performance, but also those of poverty and social exclusion. Almost 30% of the population live in conditions where “their income and resources are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living that is [regarded as acceptable](#) by Irish society generally”, while 1 in 5 children live in households with incomes below the [poverty line](#).

The extreme experience of austerity, recovery, poverty and social exclusion is leaving its mark on Irish politics. As the Republic prepares to celebrate the centenary of its Proclamation on Easter Monday this year, support for Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, the two parties that have dominated Irish political life since the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, has dropped below a combined 50% for the [first time in the history](#) of the State.

Alongside the one-island party Sinn Féin, other traditionally marginal parties, such as the Green Party, the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party, new parties, such as the political-conservative, economic-liberal RENUA Ireland, and also independents have been gaining traction. This redrawing of the political landscape in the direction of a standard left/right divide may prove more significant for Irish politics in the long run than the question of whether Irish voters will opt for continuity or change in the upcoming general elections announced for February/March 2016. This is even more the case seeing as the party political adjustments are occurring against the background of a broad and vibrant anti-austerity movement, constituting another clear indicator of the ongoing re-politicisation of economic governance on the Emerald Isle.

The Irish anti-austerity movement is hybrid and non-consolidated. In terms of formal organisations, left-oriented and progressive elements in the Irish party and trade union landscape as well as local community groups animate its activities. In the austerity era, a number of sites of struggle have facilitated closer exchanges and shared activism among previously dispersed organisations and individuals. At least three issues stand out as focal points to date. They are:

- 1) The interconnected problems of homelessness and housing shortages.
- 2) A reform of the public water sector in 2014 that rearranged water financing from a tax-based system to individual household levies.
- 3) The sale to German and British property developers of a row of houses on Dublin city centre's Moore Street, from where the leaders of the Easter Rising declared unconditional surrender to British troops and were led to imprisonment and execution in 1916.

Actions taken to protest, resist, and mediate the societal impact of austerity range from political and social activism, such as the provision of food and clothing supplies to the homeless, to civil disobedience, such as the non-payment of water bills and dismantling of water meters. Numerous large scale demonstrations around a declared “Right 2 Water” have repeatedly brought out up to 100,000 citizens at a time onto the streets who frame the water issue as one bone of contention in their general discontent with the social cost of austerity.

On 23 January 2016, approximately 30,000 people [demonstrated](#) in the fifth national event of such

magnitude in the cities of Dublin, Cork and Galway. Ten days previously, occupiers of the historical Moore Street terrace had managed to get a [court order](#) to stop the demolition of these buildings until the legal situation around the potential national heritage sight is resolved.

The varied nature of the examples provided above is testament to just how deeply the movement is embedded in the diverse strands of contemporary Irish society. It therefore seems unsurprising that in the second half of 2015, a “Right 2 Change” movement grew out of the Irish “Right 2 Water” campaign to formulate an agenda for political reform. The “Right 2 Change” [manifesto](#) proclaims ten rights (right to water, right to jobs and decent work, right to housing, right to health, right to debt justice, right to education, right to democratic reform, right to equality, right to sustainable environment, and right to national resources) as providing the path towards concrete policy alternatives for tackling Ireland’s high levels of inequality, poverty and social exclusion.

It demands a political system that fosters “solidarity, community spirit, respect and above all unity”, a claim that is made in the name of “the people of Ireland” and with [reference](#) to the pre-partition 1867 and 1916 Proclamations of Independence. Posited against the socially-disembedded nature of technocratic governance that policy elites across Europe and elsewhere promote, the Irish anti-austerity movement thus evokes both soaring social inequalities in the post-austerity era and historical ideals about the egalitarian nature of Irish sovereignty as its sources of political legitimacy.

All of the above precludes hasty speculations that the civic anger across the Ireland may be short-lived. Instead, the country appears to have joined the long list of EU member states in which the European response to economic crisis has contributed to the deepening of pre-existing political divides in public opinion - partly fed by a stubbornly widening gap in income distribution. On one side of the argument sit those who see Europe’s technocratic governance mechanisms as the guarantors of economic and political stability on the continent, not only, but particularly, in times of crisis.

On the other side, social movements that found initial expression at the grassroots level but increasingly organise into politically relevant forces perceive an overly economistic European project as a threat to core European values of community, solidarity and justice. Instead of continuing to blindly celebrate Ireland as the poster-child of austerity politics based on standard economic indicators, Europe must see what is really going on in Ireland.

*I would like to thank David Connolly, Daithí Doolan, David Gibney, Eugene McCartan, Paul Murphy, Michael O'Brien, Brendan Ogle and Michael Taft for the insights they provided in their personal interviews with me that took place in Dublin in November and December of 2015.*