

REFERENDUM

Ireland saves woman and family: surprise victory

WORLD

11_03_2024



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For Leo Eric Varadkar, the head of the Irish government, it should have been a way of celebrating 8 March; in reality it was a sort of anticipation of St Patrick's Day, the Patron Saint of Ireland. The referendum on two questions which, if successful, would have continued the drastic process of secularisation underway in Ireland. The first question concerned the definition of the family founded on marriage. The referendum proposal,

rejected by 67.7% of the voters, sought to define the family as founded on 'marriage and lasting relationships'.

This expression 'lasting relationships', in the plural, would have included not only so called 'horizontal relationships', i.e. between adults, such as cohabitation, but also 'vertical' ones between single parents and their children. The main issue is that unlike marriage, which must be consensual, public, registered, etc., the State does not know who is in these 'durable relationships', it does not know when they begin or end because the registry office does not register cohabitations.

Paradoxically, the inclusion of these 'enduring relationships' in the constitutional definition of family would have given compulsory legal recognition even to those who, by explicit wish, did not want it.

The second question is somewhat more complex. The current wording recognises the value of women's domestic life for the common good and says that the state must ensure that 'mothers are not obliged to work outside the home by economic necessity, thus negating their duties at home'. The language may appear antiquated. Some complain that it reflects the mentality of 1937, when the Irish Constitution was written but, over time, the courts have interpreted the article to refer not only to mothers but also to fathers.

This article justifies public assistance to those who work at home and, unlike what media reports have written, does not force any woman to stay at home. The referendum proposal, rejected by 74.4% of the voters, would have replaced the current article with a completely new wording, based on the recognition for the common good of the care that family members have for each other. This proposal was criticised by those who were not happy with the original wording but considered the new one too weak. Some organisations defending the disabled, for example, argued that in this way the state would relegate care to the family, instead of taking it over.

The outcome of the referendum was the - totally unexpected and surprising - overwhelming victory of the no votes. An almost shocking outcome, even on an international level.

The *Daily Compass* interviewed one of Ireland's most significant Catholic intellectuals, Angelo Bottone, a professor of philosophy and researcher at the Iona Institute, a pro-life and pro-family think tank that played a leading role in the No campaign. Prof. Bottone is also the president of Family Solidarity, an association of Catholic families, also involved in the referendum campaign. Family Solidarity is a member of FAFCE, the European federation of Catholic family organisations.

Professor Bottone, the outcome of the referendum surprised many observers.

Did you expect this result?

Honestly, no. Last Sunday the polls calculated the No vote at 25% and the undecided at 35%. The only thing that gave us hope was seeing support for our positions grow among the most informed citizens. A movement in the right direction was perceived but the days were numbered. The last debates convinced the undecided and the result was outstanding. The percentage of No votes in the second question (74.4%) is the highest ever recorded in the history of referendums, while the first question received the third highest percentage (67.7%). As if to say, never before have the people expressed themselves so clearly.

Yet you were up against everyone, as usual: the media, and almost all political parties with the exception of Aontù, the small formation that broke away from Sinn Fein precisely because of the radical secularisation of the historic nationalist formation. What happened?

True, and this makes the result even more significant. All parties, government and opposition, supported both referendums. Aontù, the only opposing party, has only one elected representative in parliament and, unlike the others, receives no public funding because it did not pass the necessary threshold. It was truly the battle of David against Goliath. Especially since the Yes campaign was led by several non-profit organisations heavily financed by the state, while on our side there were small Christian-inspired groups and a few independent senators, all of whom were well-intentioned but had few resources.

We should also note the participation of some radical feminist organisations in the No campaign, which we opposed on other issues. These feminists were particularly opposed to the second question, which would have removed the word 'mother' and 'woman' from the Constitution. Radical feminists, who have always been against gender

ideology, interpreted this as an attempt to neutralise explicit references to women in the constitution.

The government had chosen World Women's Day as the symbolic date, in an attempt to make the two questions pass more easily, and instead the opposite happened. March 8, will be remembered as the day the Irish did not erase women from their Constitution. Among religious organisations, only the Catholic Church and the Presbyterian Church stood up in defence of the family: Anglicans, Muslims and Jews were not present. Do you think that was in the name of political correctness?

The Catholic bishops wrote a clear letter, explaining the consequences of the two proposals. The Presbyterians were the only ones, among the Protestant denominations, to publicly oppose while there was no indication of a vote from the Islamic organisations but, I would argue, for a specific reason. The first question sought to equate 'lasting relationships' with marriage and, in this way, would give legal recognition to polygamous unions. Polygamous marriage, accepted by Muslims, would have remained illegal because the Constitution explicitly provides for only two spouses. However, it is not illegal for a Muslim married abroad with more than one wife to come and live with them in Ireland. One of the effects of the constitutional amendment would have been to equate polygamous families with those based on marriage. It is no surprise then that Muslims did not oppose it.

How did you convince the electorate?

Since we did not have many resources, we concentrated on TV and radio debates, rather than TV commercials, posters or leaflets. A highlight was the prime-time debate on public television last Tuesday. Maria Steen, also from the Iona Institute, was the face of the No vote. Mother of five children, architect and lawyer. A woman of faith, very active in the 2018 anti-abortion campaign. In contrast, the Yes side was represented by deputy prime minister and leader of the Fianna Fail majority party, Michael Martin. A prominent, experienced politician who represented the establishment well. It is difficult to quantify the effectiveness of these debates but, given the results, there is no doubt that Maria Steen's contribution was a winner.

Speaking of parties: this vote is a solemn slap in the face of the Fianna Fail - Fine Gael diarchy, but also a signal to Sinn Fein and the other parties, which are far removed from the real country, do you agree?

It was an earthquake that affected the entire political class. The people went in the exact opposite direction of the parties. It was not just an anti-government vote, since the

questions were also supported by the oppositions. The distance between reality and its political representation, or rather, the lack of political representation, could not have been more explicit. It was a totally anti-system vote, unforeseen by commentators.

Do think this predicts a hopeful future for the Aontu party?

At the moment it is still small, but it represents the only alternative to the dominant single thought. The referendum campaign has given a lot of visibility to their leader, Peadar Tóibín, and given the extraordinary results, I am convinced that the party will also gain something from it.

Can this clear-cut vote be read as the Irish people wanting to put a brake on the de-Christianising drift of recent years?

I would be cautious in drawing such conclusions. The process of de-Christianisation continues, but Friday's vote represents a caesura. It is the end of a decade of liberal reforms that involved not only the redefinition of marriage in 2015, opening up to same-sex couples, and the legalisation of abortion in 2018, but a whole series of laws and policy decisions. Just in the last few days, a parliamentary committee has proposed the legalisation of euthanasia. It seems that the Irish political class, as if to compensate for a sense of inferiority due to an overly religious past, goes out of its way to appear the most anti-Christian on sensitive issues. The referendum result definitely points in another direction. The people, at least this time, said no.

Could the outcome of this referendum begin a significant recovery, after very difficult years, of the social and political presence of Catholics?

There is no political formation of explicit Catholic inspiration. There are politicians, not many, who are not ashamed of their faith, and there is still a widespread religious sentiment, but this does not translate into a political proposal. Last night, celebrating, we were wondering how to capitalise on this success. There is much to ponder but for now, we want to enjoy this amazing victory.