

Talk delivered by Dr. Liam Weeks at Public Meeting hosted by The People's Convention in Cork on 23rd Jan. 2014.

The title for the meeting was:

The People must be Represented, not Political Parties!

(Dr. Liam Weeks works at the Department of Government at UCC, is widely published and, as is clear from his talk, has investigated the question of independent representation in great depth. He was a guest speaker at the meeting.)

Thank you chair.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me begin.

Just to let you know my own particular background, I have been researching independent politics for over 10 years. It was the subject of a PhD, a postdoc and also now as a lecturer in the Department of Government, UCC.

Tonight I want to talk to you about the role of parties and independents in political life. I want to show you that although it is believed that parties are necessary for the functioning of effective democracy, Ireland is virtually unique in that as a liberal democracy we have always had a presence of independents in our parliament. In no other country do they have as strong a presence as in Ireland. In fact, in most other countries independents have suffered the fate of the dodo and have been extinct for over a century.

And I think it is important from this perspective to stress Irish people's commitment to democracy. We are one of the oldest surviving parliamentary democracies in the world. We have never succumbed to anti-democratic ideologies or fantasies. Indeed, we are also relatively unique in Europe in that while most countries have radical right-wing parties such as the Front National in France, Gert Wilders' Party for Freedom and UKIP, no such party has come to prominence in Ireland. So, clearly, Irish democracy is something different and this is what I want to talk about tonight, in the context of independent politics.

I will begin by outlining the unique role played by independents in Irish politics. Now by an independent I mean someone not standing on a party platform and not taking any whip when elected.

So let us begin with some facts. In 2011 17 independents were elected to the Dáil, so about one in ten TDs are independent. In no other democracy do independents experience this kind of success. Most European countries have no independents in their parliament. This includes Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Holland, Belgium and so on. In fact there are more independents in Ireland than the rest of the world put together.

Not only that but on the odd occasion they are elected elsewhere, such as the BBC journalist Martin Bell in the UK or comedian Jakob Haugaard in Denmark, they tend to be ostracized and have no influence in parliament. This is why most independents in other countries are one-hit wonders; they are only elected once.

However, in Ireland, they manage to wield great influence when they hold the balance of power, by which I mean parties need the support of independents to form a government or stay in one. Indeed, approximately 40% of governments in Ireland have relied upon independents in this way. These have included Taoisigh such as Cosgrave, De Valera, Costello, Lemass, FitzGerald, Haughey, and most recently Ahern and Cowen. In return for independents holding this balance of power their influence has been considerable, perhaps the most famous example of which was the 1982 Gregory Deal when the late Tony Gregory supported Charlie Haughey in return for a considerable package of spending for his constituency in Dublin Central. I also recall after the 2007 election the headline on the front page of the now-defunct Sunday Tribune read 'The Kingmakers', below which were photographs of the 5 independents re-elected and the role they were expected to play in the formation of a new government.

It is this perhaps unique influence of independents in Ireland that makes this topic all the more interesting. So the question we have to pose is why are they present in Ireland and not anywhere else? The answer concerns the belief in the centrality of parties to the functioning of modern democracy.

This is what I want to talk about next.

So for example I have here a quote from one of the leading academic textbooks used in universities to teach about European politics. It goes as follows:

'If there were no parties – in other words, if every member of parliament was an independent with no institutionalised links with other members – the result would be something close to chaos' (Gallagher, Laver and Mair 2005: 308).

And this textbook was written by three scholars steeped in Irish political science

There is a belief that if we didn't have parties democracy wouldn't function. To challenge this belief we need to examine the reasons given for the necessity of political parties:

Why do we have parties?

There are 7 main reasons given in the academic literature:

- (i) Elite recruitment. Parties play key role in controlling recruitment to parliament and to govt. If you want to be elected to parliament, you need, or almost need, to be nominated as an election candidate by a party. Likewise, parties, or party leaders, control who's in govt; if you want to be in govt you must usually be a member of one of the parties that control, indeed in many countries you need to be a senior member of it. True that in some countries non-party people might be appointed to govt, but they need to be selected by a relevant party leader. Thus gaining access to political power requires being accepted by a party, usually being senior member of it.

(ii) Elite socialisation. As well as recruiting elite, parties also socialise them. With exceptions, the political elite in most democratic countries consists of people who have spent a number of years within a political party, working with other party members and learning to see the political world as the party sees it, from party's perspective. They have to get used to working with others, teamwork, coordinating activities with other figs in party, learning about constraints party discipline imposes on them.

(iii) Linkage between rulers and ruled. The main mechanism by which voters are linked to political world. Flow of information in both directions. Parties exist to represent. This often seen as their primary function. However for this to work parties must be responsive

(iv) Interest aggregation. Put forward packages of proposals, not just one policy. Most parties at elections put forward manifestos containing more or less coherent overall package of policies. Give direction to govt; party control of govt, whether by one party or a coal of them, should mean some more or less coherent programme that govt aims to follow, rather than disparate indiv mins all pursuing own ideas.

(v) Structure political world for many voters, who see politics in terms of fortunes of parties as much as fate of issues; this especially true at election time. Indiv voters don't have time to work out view on every political issue; many tend to see political world in terms of parties, ie trust their party's judgement.

(vi) Organise government: parties in theory provide stability and coherence in government. They act as a bind that ensures members of government work together in a cohesive fashion. Parties also facilitate cooperation between different branches of government

(vii) More efficient for political actors. Individual MPs can achieve more as part of a team. For example, many of us may have heard of the prisoner's dilemma whereby two prisoners can ensure a better outcome by co-operating rather than working against each other.

However, in many of these functions parties are failing or where they are not, we have to question the usefulness of their function.

For example, leaving elite recruitment and socialisation to parties means that we are in danger of producing Orwellian groupthink where everyone thinks and acts along the same lines. The linkage parties provide now between rulers and ruled is also very much questionable: how responsive are parties to voters: do they listen? Do parties aggregate interests or structure the political world any more for voters? How many voters read political party manifestos? The 7th function, that it makes life easier for politicians, is most likely still true, but does that matter? Do we want to make life any easier for them?

So, the assumptions on the necessity of political parties stand on shaky ground. Not only that, but parties as we know it are a relatively modern phenomenon. The mass disciplined political party only emerged at the end of the 19th century, one of the first

examples of which was Parnell's Home Rule Party in the House of Commons. Before this, there were very loose coalitions or alliances in parliament, who sometimes called themselves parties, but they were nothing like the modern phenomenon.

The reason given why we now have parties is to cope with mass suffrage and the complexities of the modern political world. It was ok in an era of a limited franchise and small government. But political life has changed. That is why we need parties. But does the evidence support this theory? The problem is there are no known cases at the national level in the world's major democracies of independents in total control. So that means we don't know if democracy would collapse if we didn't have parties. But we also don't know if it would thrive. This is what Donald Rumsfeld would call a known unknown.

However, that's at the national level in major democracies. If we extend our focus beyond this, there are a considerable number of cases of parliamentary systems where parties are in a minority or entirely absent.

These include five island democracies in the South Pacific (Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Kiribati, Palau), Nunavut and the Northwest Territories in Canada, the Nebraskan state assembly in the US, the Upper house of parliament in Tasmania, and the British dependencies of the Falkland Islands, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.

How do these jurisdictions manage to function without parties? The answer is I don't fully know as I have only visited a few of these regions but I have applied for research funding or if there are any generous benefactors in the audience I will come up with the answers.

One region I have been to is Nebraska. Although most members of the state assembly there identify with a party, once they are elected that is where their links with the parties end. There is no party whip and to reach a majority decision amongst the 45-strong membership they simply try and persuade each other of the merits of their bills. Approximately 500 bills are introduced each year, of which 200 get passed. There are no fixed coalitions and membership of each majority changes with every vote. This has not resulted in instability or political crises and in fact Nebraska is known for its fiscal prudence.

Now there is of course a difference between independents occupying some seats in parliament, as is the case in Ireland and occupying all, as in the aforementioned cases. Still, it needs to be emphasized how unusual Ireland is from this perspective and this is what I want to talk about for my remaining time tonight.

I want to show you how fortunate we are in our democracy in that the parties do not have a monopoly on political representation and perhaps explain why we have managed to prevent the emergence of a party cartel. Because really that is the best way to describe what has happened elsewhere. Parties' omnipotence has resulted in them changing the various electoral rules and regulations to ensure no challengers to their rule will emerge.

I have outlined for you already briefly at the beginning of this talk the position occupied by independents in Irish politics. To repeat, at the moment approximately one in ten of our TDs are independent, more than the rest the democratic world combined. In fact, looking at the few countries that have had independents (almost all of which tend to be English-speaking), Ireland has had fifty-nine times the proportion of independents elected compared with Britain, thirty-two times that in the US, ten times that of Canada and five times that of Australia. This special position in Ireland explains why John Coakley noted in *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, the leading textbook of Irish politics, that '*The most distinctive phenomenon on the Irish electoral landscape has been the Independent deputy*'. (Coakley, 2005: 28)

So I think we need to appreciate how fortunate in Ireland we are as a voting public to have independents. It doesn't matter whether we support them, believe in them, etc. The point is they exist and they increase the range of options for us when voting. This is called pluralism and is particularly important in a country where there is very little difference if any between the main competing parties.

This can only be a good thing for Irish democracy.

So why do we have independents in Ireland? I have written and researched a great deal on this, trying to understand this phenomenon. Is it that we're just different to everyone else? Is it that we don't like parties as much as other countries? Is it our unusual electoral system, used to elect only one other lower house of parliament in the world?

No one answer suffices. All these factors are necessary, but none are sufficient. I want to briefly mention four possible reasons: size, political culture, the voting system and the Irish party system

The first relates to size. In a jurisdiction with either a small population or territory, the levels of personal interaction are higher than in larger communities and there is usually a greater premium placed on face-to-face contact. Such a culture, combined with a small-sized society, reduces the necessity of parties, which are not needed as cues or to mobilize voters. In general, therefore, we might expect independents to be more prevalent the smaller the society (below a particular threshold). Indeed, when we consider small island states, there is some evidence to support this hypothesis. One study of thirty-one such states indicates that eight of them lack political parties. In the small, close-knit Irish communities, political competition is quite candidate-centred, giving independents with an established profile and local reputation a reasonable chance of winning a seat. For example, the average number of first preference votes for winning candidates at the 2011 Dáil election was 8,338, a figure not beyond the bounds of possibility for a candidate with a considerable local profile, whether party or independent.

The experience of independents in other small states in Europe, however, indicates that smallness is not a sufficient condition for electoral success. Luxembourg, Cyprus, Malta, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Slovenia all have smaller populations and territories but no independents. They are also absent in Israel, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Slovakia, all of which have smaller jurisdictions than Ireland.

The second factor is political culture –two factors of Irish politics that seem to help independents are the prevalence of localism and personalism. with such key values being personalism and localism, as well as an apathy, or perhaps antipathy to parties. Personalism implies that electoral behaviour is motivated by personal knowledge of, and interaction with, candidates; localism that it is affinity to the local community and how the candidate deals with its primary issues that matter. In such a culture, party label is less of an asset than an environment where national issues and policies are to the fore and where parties are seen as the only viable organs of political representation.

Indeed, at Irish elections ‘*choosing a candidate to look after the needs of the constituency*’ has consistently been cited as the primary voting incentive. This is relevant for independents, because when other factors are controlled for, the higher the level of orientation toward the individual candidate and the locality, the higher the likelihood of voting for an independent. Evidence from the Eurobarometer and CSES datasets suggests that the level of anti-party sentiment in Ireland exceeds that in most other countries. From a level of 37 per cent in 1978, as many as 67 per cent in 2007 said they did not feel close to any political party, second only to the Netherlands. In terms of specific measures of anti-party sentiment, Irish voters also ranked top of the league table of negative attitudes. Data from the CSES suggests that anti-party levels in Ireland (49 per cent) are far higher than elsewhere; indeed, they are almost twice that of the second-placed country, Belgium (26 per cent)

Of course, anti-party sentiment on its own is not enough to ensure an independent presence; otherwise the trend of rising disaffection from parties in most democracies would have resulted in an independent breakthrough in at least some of these systems. Nevertheless, the significant presence of non-identifiers in Ireland is an important point. It means that independent candidates are fishing in a large, well-stocked pool compared with most other countries.

The third factor is the voting system and how favourable the rules are towards independents. Many voting systems in Europe put independents at a major disadvantage because they require them to compromise their independence and compete as part of a list. The Irish electoral system of PR-STV is seen as the most favourable for independents, primarily for four reasons: the presence of multi-member constituencies, the preferential nature of STV, the candidate-centred nature of the system and the fact that it favours independent-minded behaviour.

The final factor to consider relates to the party system and the nature of party competition. In general, the weaker the parties and the social ties that bind the party system in place, the stronger the expected independent presence. This is because the weaker the premium placed on party affiliation and organization, the greater the incentive to choose an independent status rather than form or join a party. This is the case in some Pacific island states, in some of the former Soviet republics, and is still particularly the case in Russia. And indeed it can be applied to Ireland where there is no clear class or social structure to electoral behaviour. This argument can also be applied to party organization. The more decentralized the party structure and the weaker the organization in terms of its ability to offer loyalty-inducing incentives, the more likely we are to see politicians veer between party and independent status.

Indeed, we can go one step further to argue that an independent presence is often the product of internal party dynamics; the more cohesive matters are within a party, the less likely we are to see party dissidents break away to run as independents. Again, independents in Ireland are often the product of internal rows.

So, they are possibly the four main reasons we have independents in Ireland. To wrap up, I've shown you that parties are not perhaps as essential to democracy as some might have us believe and in fact Irish democracy has not been any the poorer for its presence of independents. In fact, to repeat what I said earlier, regardless of whether you are for or against independents, we are fortunate in Ireland to have them. They provide an additional political alternative, but importantly they also indicate the openness of our political system, that anyone can stand for office and be elected and have some influence and power. You don't need to be a member of party, so unlike other countries, there is life outside the party in Ireland. Thank you.