

Speech by Ita Mangan, Chairperson of the Citizens' Information Board

Citizens' Involvement in Key decisions for Ireland's future

This Assembly is being asked to examine a number of issues which are likely to be key decisions for Ireland's future. It is a unique opportunity for the 100 participants here today who have been chosen to take part in the decision making process. I propose to speak about some key decisions that I believe will have to be made in the future but my main focus is not on the particular issues but rather on how citizens can be involved, or more deeply involved, in making decisions.

As citizens, we are involved in decision making in numerous ways and at several levels. We are involved when we vote in elections and referendums. We are involved when we argue or lobby for changes as individuals or as members of campaigning groups. We may join political parties, we may avail of opportunities to take part in public consultation processes. We are also involved when we take part in community activities; you may not consider it in this light but if you contribute to your local community you are making a decision about what sort of community and society you want.

There are many citizens who opt out of the opportunities to participate in decision making. The reasons for this have not been adequately analysed. It could simply be indifference or apathy; it could be lack of self-confidence or it could be that they consider that their voices will not be heard or will not make a difference. I believe that it is important to encourage and enable all citizens to become involved. This requires effort on the part of the institutions of the State and of citizens themselves.

Sometimes it is necessary to state the obvious: citizens' involvement in key decisions requires that

- citizens know when and in what context key decisions are being taken and
- citizens take an interest in those decisions and in the decision making processes.

This means that there is an obligation on decision makers to keep citizens informed and there is an obligation on citizens to be informed. Ideally, we would all ensure that we are well informed about the issues, always exercise our vote, be active members of our local communities and take part in public consultation processes.

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How decisions are made: Citizens and the State

When people talk about “the State”, they mainly mean the apparatus of government, the decision makers in government and the public service. This remote “State” is often seen as separate from people; the “State” makes decisions about taxes and benefits, it imposes laws, it is criticised if it fails to provide adequately for various individuals or groups.

Actually, the State is us – the people of Ireland; “We the People” as the US Constitution puts it. The apparatus of the State belongs to us; I accept that many people feel excluded and do not regard themselves as part of the State but, if we are to be active and involved citizens, we must recognise that we are the State; we decide what kind of society we want and we design the institutions of the State to meet our requirements.

The decision makers – national government, local government and various State bodies - are all obliged to provide information to citizens. The Freedom of Information legislation gives citizens a means of accessing information. The quality and accessibility of information provided by the various State bodies varies considerably. There is a need for accurate, clearly expressed information to be provided.

If the institutions of the State were working perfectly there would not be a need for institutions like Ombudsman offices - or indeed the Citizens Information Board - to act as a conduit or mediation point between citizens and those institutions. These conduits are essential to facilitate citizens to find the required information and to enforce their rights.

In practice, much of the information about policy issues to which citizens are exposed comes through the lens of the media and this lens often distorts the view. In Ireland, we are fortunate not to have the completely polarised views which are on display on US TV channels. However, even our respected media outlets are not immune from giving a distorted picture. Traditional media transmit information – in some cases adequately. Unfortunately, many traditional media outlets do not use neutral, objective language and therefore do not provide the sort of unbiased information which citizens need if they are to make an informed decision. I could quote many examples of this but one simple example illustrates the problem. A respected newspaper recently described the price paid for an expensive house in Dublin as evidence of a “return to rude good health” of the property market. Increasing house prices are not evidence of a healthy property market: this does not constitute neutral unbiased information.

Speech by Ita Mangan, Chairperson of the Citizens' Information Board

The language needs to be neutral. Loose and not generally intelligible language is very frequently used when discussing economic issues. An understanding of economic issues is essential for full participation by citizens in decision making. It has to be said that this loose language is not just perpetrated by the media; politicians also speak in unclear language. All politicians subscribe to the idea that Budgets should be fair – very few make it clear what fairness means to them.

Social media provides powerful methods of communication and could be used more effectively by State institutions in communicating with citizens. Unfortunately, it also facilitates commentary that can be appallingly crude and disrespectful.

As I have already said, citizens have responsibilities as well – we have a responsibility to inform ourselves and take part in decision making.

As well as elections and referendums, there are processes in place for direct consultation with citizens. There are public consultations on various policy issues at different times. In my experience individual citizens do get involved in policy discussions but the numbers tend to be very small. I was the chair of the Advisory Group on Tax and Social Welfare which was established in 2011 to examine a number of specific issues. Individual parents did make submissions in relation to Child Benefit and individual self-employed people did in relation to social welfare entitlements for the self-employed.

The introduction of the pre-legislative scrutiny process in the Oireachtas allows for citizens to express their views and, of course, citizens can always tell their elected representatives their views. However, it seems that the interaction between citizens and their elected representatives in Ireland seems to be mainly concerned with personal rights and entitlements rather than wider public policy issues.

There are many NGOs and voluntary groups who are actively involved in the decision making processes and are directly consulted by government agencies in a number of areas. These consultations are sometimes described as enabling the involvement of “civil society” in decision making. Many voluntary sector groups are providers of services on behalf of the State. We need to be careful not to assume that consulting with the voluntary sector is the same as enabling and encouraging citizens to be involved; it means that a number of citizens are involved but further efforts are required to ensure that all have an opportunity for involvement.

Speech by Ita Mangan, Chairperson of the Citizens' Information Board

We also need to consider why some issues generate more heat than light and attract more opposition: is it because a forceful personality or group take up the issue and create an opposition.

I am not expressing any view on the appropriateness or otherwise of direct water charges but it is interesting to ask why their introduction generated such a level of opposition when the Public Service Obligation levy which is designed to fund renewable energy generation failed to elicit even a moderate level of opposition. It is also a direct charge on consumers. It could, like water, be financed from general taxation. The PSO levy increased by 23% on 1 October 2016; I am not aware of any public protest about this.

We also need to ask why citizens are not well informed on issues that do or will directly affect them. For example, how much awareness do we, the citizens of Ireland, have of the commitments made by our governments in the international arenas of the EU and the UN; do people generally subscribe to, for example, the Millennium Development Goals or to the general principles set out in various UN Conventions, the Sustainable Development Goals, the 2030 Agenda. Surveys in the UK found that in September 2015 only 4% of the UK public had heard of the MDGs. I am not aware of any such surveys in Ireland but I suspect that the results would not be substantially different. I hope that your deliberations on climate change will lead to a greater public knowledge of all these issues.

Key decisions

It is somewhat risky to try to foretell what the key decisions will be – even in the near future. It can also be difficult to pinpoint when exactly major decisions were made. We know when the final decision is made in relation to major issues but it is not always easy to pinpoint when the issue started to be considered. Citizens need to be involved from the point of consideration to the point of decision.

The State provides

One key decision that has to be made is to what degree should the State provide for individuals? If there is a consensus that the State should contribute to the costs of, certain activities and services, then how is the dividing line decided? Who decides? How do we assess people's ability to provide for themselves?

Speech by Ita Mangan, Chairperson of the Citizens' Information Board

For example, the State contributes to the cost of rearing children through Child Benefit for every child, education for every child and other benefits targeted at lower income parents and children with disabilities. I think most, and possibly all, parents expect to bear much of the cost of rearing children but there is no consensus on how much the State should provide, should it provide for all children or only for some and at what point should State provision start.

Similar issues about universal benefits and targeted benefits arise in the case of third level education, provision for older people and for people in need of housing.

While citizens have a right to be involved in these decisions, it must be said that there is also a very practical reason for our involvement. The consequences of a decision that the State should provide are that we the people must contribute sufficient taxes to cover the costs.

The ageing population

One of the issues with which this Assembly will have to deal is “how we best respond to the challenges and opportunities of an ageing population”.

The fact that people are living longer and living healthily for longer is a triumph for human development. There are challenges but there are enormous opportunities. So, it is important that the consideration of the issues be framed in this light. Again, language is very important here; describing people in their 60s as “elderly”, with the implication that they are less able than others, is no longer appropriate; phrases such as “demographic timebomb” are emotive and not conducive to rational debate and decision making.

Who pays for pensions is one of the areas is one area where the question of individual responsibility and State responsibility arises.

It is also important to maintain an historical perspective. The welfare state, which most of us take for granted, has only been in existence for just over 100 years; this is a very short period in human history but life expectancy has improved dramatically in that short period and decisions taken 100 years ago are not necessarily the right decisions for now.

There is understandable resistance to increasing the age at which the State Pension is payable. The State Pension (or the Old Age Pension) was introduced in Ireland in 1909 at a time when most people started work at 14 and the vast majority did not live long enough to

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actually draw down the pension; the then pension age of 70 was chosen on the basis that very few people would qualify. We are now in a situation where most people do not start to work until they are in their 20s and they have a reasonable expectation of living for at least 20 years after they qualify for the pension.

The EU, Brexit and understanding the issues

The negotiations which will take place between the UK and the other member states of the EU over the next few years are extremely important for Irish citizens. Citizens of all EU member states need to engage with this process and decision makers need to facilitate that engagement.

The EU is a very recent creation. Over the centuries of known human activity, there have been many alliances, some more successful than others. The EU differs in that it is a deeper alliance and the member states have voluntarily transferred certain decision making powers to the EU institutions. The main EU decision making institutions are, of course, composed of representatives of the member states.

It is clear that citizens' knowledge of how the EU operates is chronically bad; it may be somewhat better in Ireland than in the UK but it is still very poor. The institutional structure of the EU is complex but it is understandable with a little effort. Efforts have been made by EU institutions and by national governments to improve public knowledge of the EU. These efforts have not been particularly successful.

In the Brexit negotiations we, the citizens of Ireland and the citizens of the other EU member states, need to know what is being discussed, what is being considered and what the likely outcomes will be. Some outcomes are, of course, unforeseen and unintended but citizens need to be aware of the likely outcomes.

No doubt some governments will argue that the negotiations must be conducted in secrecy. Until this year, the Irish Budget was kept secret (apart from leaks, of course). Was this secrecy necessary – of course not.

Robust debate

Properly informed robust debate on issues is essential. We can debate robustly without descending to the disrespectful, derogatory, crude and personalised invective such as is occurring in the current Presidential election in the US.