

Tuesday 22nd July 2014

Speech by Minister for Health Leo Varadkar at the MacGill Summer School

HOW TO RESTORE TRUST BETWEEN GOVERNORS AND GOVERNED?

A Republic of Conscience

Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen. Before I start, I just want to thank Joe Mulholland and his team for inviting me to be here and once again, for putting together such an interesting programme.

‘At their inauguration, public leaders must swear to uphold unwritten law and weep to atone for their presumption to hold office’. So wrote Seamus Heaney, in his great poem for International Human Rights Day - ‘From the Republic of Conscience’ - written almost thirty years ago. Even the very title is evocative, projecting an image of the kind of polity we would all like to live in – not just a free and independent republic, but a republic where the ‘symptoms of creeping privilege disappear’ ‘and lightning spells universal good’.

I have been thinking a lot recently about the work of Seamus Heaney, ever since I had the pleasure of visiting the Heaney exhibition at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, over St. Patrick’s weekend. There I got to see his writing desk from the 1980s, made out of two planks from an old bench at Carysfort College where he had taught. And I got to read some of his correspondence with other writers, and look at some of his poems in draft and completed form.

Reading some of the material, I was struck by one thing in particular. Heaney was not always the confident poet of later years, the man who would deservedly win the Nobel Prize for literature, and inspire so many people in Ireland and around the world with his words. He admitted that the writing style in his collection ‘North’ reflected the tension that he himself was feeling in the 1970s. He had moved from Belfast to Wicklow, and was about to move to Dublin, and felt incredible pressure to engage actively with the political events in Northern Ireland.

It was a time when he said he was struggling for confidence, expecting the collection ‘to be hammered’, trusting the poems but not how they would be received. In his poem ‘Oysters’ in his later collection, ‘Field Work’ he said he was:

‘angry that my trust could not repose in the clear light, like poetry or freedom.’

It is for this reason that one literary critic has referred to ‘an anxiety of trust’ in the early work of Heaney. He faced a struggle to come to terms with a number of things: his own identity, the political struggle on the island, and his own emerging talent as a poet.

An Anxiety of Trust

Trust can be a difficult issue for a politician as well as a poet.

I wonder sometimes do we suffer from an anxiety of trust in politics. At its simplest level, it is the cynicism that is out there when it comes to politics and politicians. This is referenced in the Council

of Europe report in 2012 as 'public distrust in democracy'. It is evident from surveys done in this country, when politicians score low compared to almost all other professions. Doctors incidentally score highly, and even though I am both a doctor and a politician, and could take some comfort in the higher score, I wonder is there not something wrong when we have so little faith collectively in the people we elect to govern on our behalf. Perhaps it was always so. Suspicion in our politicians goes all the way back to ancient times.

But I wonder if a bigger problem is that politicians don't trust the people?

We saw that recently when the attempt to create a directly elected Mayor of Dublin was opposed by some local politicians, who were afraid of losing some of their power, and who sacrificed the opportunity of real reform because of fear of what change would bring.

Time and time again, politicians fail to trust people. We tell them that you can have a school in every village, a university in every large town. And worse still, even if it is affordable, we do not trust people enough to tell them why it would not be a good idea. Routinely, in opposition, politicians promise the undeliverable and then, surprisingly, under-deliver.

In my mind, trust must be given, before it can be claimed, and unless we show that we are free from an anxiety about trusting the people, then we cannot expect them to have trust in us.

To restore trust between the governors and the governed we must begin by showing that we trust the people in deciding their own destiny. We must recognize that we are all citizens in this republic of conscience that we want to create, and we all have a share and a responsibility in making it a success. Personally I dislike framing the question in terms of 'governed' and 'governors'. Politicians are only the custodians of the people's trust, the short-term guardians of their rights. The people are much more than just simply 'the governed'. They are sovereign. As Michael Collins said, we must govern, not to rule but to serve.

The Idealism of Politics

However I think I would challenge one element in the 2012 Council of Europe document on public trust in democracy. It claimed that the financial collapse had eroded faith in representative democratic institutions across Europe, that the bonds of trust had been damaged, and that people felt betrayed and had lost faith in democracy as a result. I disagree. People lost faith in a lot of things because of the financial collapse - in the banks, in the political parties which had made the wrong decisions, and in the economic system which had allowed such failures. But not in the democratic process itself. People did not want to see their republic of conscience replaced with a closed system of fear, instead they wanted the politicians to prove that they still deserved their trust, and that political and economic sovereignty and self-respect could be restored.

That said, while I disagree with the diagnosis in the Council of Europe document, I am more impressed with the prescription it presents. It suggests that 'sound states are based on strong democracies. To become strong, democracies need to make existing democratic structures more representative.' So what is needed is more 'democratic elements carefully designed in order to increase citizens' participation and to promote active citizenship'.

Greater participation by the people – through active citizenship – is the only solution to the anxiety of trust we suffer from.

I was fortunate to grow up in a house where active citizenship was encouraged and expected. While not a party political household, discussion about politics, religion, money was to be encouraged and I was always brought up to believe that politics and politicians could do great deeds.

At the age of twenty I ran for election to the local council, and lost badly, receiving just 380 votes. But I'll never forget what engaging in the political process had taught me at that age. Through meeting people on the campaign trail – and sharing in their concerns - I was struck by an idealism about politics that has never left me.

I had my own youthful vision of a republic of conscience, and I have tried to honour that vision in everything I have done since – as an opposition spokesperson, and as a minister – no matter whether it was popular or unpopular, damaging or distinguished.

It is why I was so honoured to be asked to serve as Minister for Health, even though the challenge is enormous and daunting. It is for such challenges that I got involved in politics in the first place, to try and make things better. Unfortunately since taking office I have been unable to confirm a story that José Eduardo dos Santos, the longstanding African president, made a joke that being leader of Angola for 35 years was considerably easier than being Minister for Health in Ireland!

I am, however, delighted to be on this panel – with Ministers for Health, past, present, and possibly even future.

Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin, and the Anxiety of Truth

The question before us as a panel is about restoring trust, taking it for granted that trust has been eroded, and that uncritical trust is always a good thing.

But, trust can be a negative as well as a positive.

Sometimes we trust too easily, and our republic of conscience is damaged as a result.

Although I have great respect for Deputy Martin and Deputy McDonald as individual politicians, I have serious concerns about how their parties operate and have operated in the past. And here we have examples where trust has blinded us to the reality, and Irish life was damaged as a result.

When another former leader of Fianna Fail, and another former Minister for Health - Charles J. Haughey - was in power, few questioned the source of his wealth. We were prepared to take on trust that it had been secured legitimately, even though the evidence suggested otherwise, and all our instincts should have demanded that we speak out. There was a collective failure of the media, politicians and the public. But the guilt was greater for those in his own party. Instead of exhibiting a healthy anxiety of trust, Fianna Fáil suffered from an anxiety of truth, and preferred to believe its own fictional narrative rather than face the reality.

The Haughey story was just a dress rehearsal for the rise of another former Taoiseach with complex finances, the property bubble, the spending spree and the inevitable collapse of the Celtic Tiger. The untruths that we tell become part of the untruth that we live, and we allowed ourselves to believe that we had created an economic miracle that would endure for all time. Once again we suffered from an anxiety of truth, and we are still paying the consequences.

So trust is not always a good thing, and loyalty is not always a good thing either, and sometimes the republic of conscience requires people to shake that trust, in order to cut through the fog

of dishonesty and distortions. Perhaps we should take the advice of Ronald Reagan who in his disarmament talks with the Soviet Union said his policy was to 'trust but verify'.

During the Fianna Fail years in power quite frankly it would have been better if there had been less trust between politicians and the people, so that the truth of what was going on could have been more quickly challenged and exposed. The same might be said of trust in the church, charities and Gardai to name but three.

In my opinion, Sinn Fein also suffers from an anxiety of truth, because it refuses to trust the people with the truth about its past. Its members defiantly proclaim that their President has nothing to answer for about his activities in the past, blindly insisting that there is no story to tell, even though such claims are increasingly hollow and hard to believe. The general public I think does not believe these denials, but is prepared to go along with the convenient reworking of history for the sake of the greater good – peace on the island. It brings to mind Michael Longley's great poem, 'Ceasefire', where the Trojan War is used to explore the horrible compromises that must sometimes be made for peace. As the king suggests at the end, 'I must get down on my knees and do what must be done. And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son'.

We have all decided to do what must be done for the sake of continuing peace on this island – and that is the right decision – but until Sinn Fein trusts the people with the truth about its own past, it can never expect a majority of the people to trust it on the key political issues of our time. Otherwise we are signing up for more false leadership, based on evasion, rather than a genuine idealism, and this country has had too much of that.

Sinn Fein's lack of trust in the Irish people is also mirrored in the divergent policy positions it takes North and South. But I shall speak about that another time.

As I have suggested, trust must be given first, before it can be claimed. Fianna Fail's great failure was that it claimed too much trust, and then betrayed it. Sinn Fein's great failure is that it has never trusted the people in the first place.

How to Restore Trust between Governors and Governed?

I think it would be better if people had trust in their politicians, but it should never be uncritical, and it should always be earned.

The government's effort to regain trust have centred around economic repair and political repair. We also need social repair too as the Tanaiste eloquently argued the other day.

On the economy, we have sought to regain trust the trust of people by demonstrating that we can run our own affairs, balance the books, reduce the debt, rebuild the banking system and send the troika home.

We have also sought to repair politics. To give a few concrete examples. There is now an effective ban on corporate donations breaking the link between business, money and politics that was a feature of our politics for far too long. We have quotas to ensure there are more female candidates at the next General Election, the most extensive reform of local government since 1898, legislation to protect whistleblowers and regulate lobbying, the constitutional convention, more powerful Oireachtas committees, much longer Dail sessions with dedicated time for TDs to put forward their own legislation much of which has been accepted, requiring newly appointed Chairpersons of state companies and agencies to go before Oireachtas committees for vetting.

Admittedly, sometimes we have been unsuccessful such as the Seanad referendum and the referendum on Oireachtas enquiries but we must now accept the people's wisdom on both those matters. And sometimes, we have not lived up to our own standards. But I challenge anyone to point to another government that did so much in such a short space of time.

But what's required to restore trust is so much more. For those of us who love politics, the science and art of it, we love to obsess about whip systems, electoral commissions, list systems and electoral reform

For most people, these are not of great interest. They want a secure job, decent take home pay and quality public services for the taxes they pay. They do not necessarily expect the government to deliver all of those things but they do expect the government to help and in that regard we have a long way to go to restore living standards to what they should be.

To finish as I began with Seamus Heaney. Heaney came to terms with his own anxiety of trust, by finding courage within himself, and reaching out for an idealism that could be shared by all. He realized that sometimes you need to 'walk on air against your better judgement'. In Ireland we face a choice between suffering from an anxiety of trust, one that afflicts politicians as much as the people, or go to the other extreme and suffer from an absence of truth. Clearly it would be better if we could learn from the lessons of the past. And perhaps here we can take our inspiration from Seamus Heaney.

One solution as we try to create our republic of conscience, is to seek to balance trust and the truth. The truth as a safeguard to protect our values and trust as an inspiration to lead us to greater things.

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