Ireland: Still Up Recession Creek Without a Paddle

written by Lily Murphy | July 30, 2012

On December 6th 1921 the Anglo-Irish treaty was signed. It was an agreement between Britain and Ireland to end the Irish war of independence and create peace on the war ravaged island of Ireland, but the main clause of the treaty was that six counties of the north of Ireland would remain under British rule while the remaining twenty-six counties could enjoy limited freedom as a self governing dominion of the British empire. That agreement occurred ninety years ago and ninety years to that exact date, Ireland is now a republic, albeit twenty-six counties are a republic; northern Ireland is shared by an assembly of both unionists and nationalists; and peace is finally allowed to make its mark on the island of Ireland. Yet ninety years on and the Irish people are still suffering, this time not from the rule of Britain but rather from the rule of capitalism.

While Michael Collins and the British co-signed an agreement to split the country in two halves back in 1921, ninety years later the government under Taoiseach Enda Kenny is following the orders of the EU and IMF by splitting Irish society in two, a society of the haves and the have nots. The latter is a much more common element in Irish society these days.

Ninety years ago the youth of Ireland took up guns and fought for their freedom, and, even though times were economically harsh back then, it did not deter the many young men and women who volunteered to fight in order to achieve some sort of freedom through nationalism. Although their goal of a unified socialist republic was not achieved, they did gain some freedom, a freedom they had never experienced in their life time, and the revolutionary spirit which they ignited set out a marker for future generations to follow. The sad tale to tell of those future generations is that they have lost the fighting spirit and are void of any revolutionary notions; instead they have become a lost generation.

To compare the youth of 1921 to the youth of 2011 makes ninety years worth of difference. 1921 saw the youth rise up and fight for national freedom from the British empire; 2011 sees the youth accept defeat and not fight for economic freedom from the IMF and an emerging German economic empire. Growing up in the thick of the Celtic tiger years, I and many others of my generation never experienced any economic stress. The word recession never entered my vocabulary and emigration was something we read about only in the history books. But now that we know what recession and emigration is, we know what the consequences of a hard financial depression is, and we know it all too well. It is true to say that the youth are affected quite badly by this recession but we must not forget that those who also bear the burden of harsh times are the parents of the Celtic tiger cubs. The mothers and fathers must also pay the price for the bankers' greed and politicians' corruption by seeing their offspring head off to foreign lands to live new lives, far from the recessionary ordeals of 21st century Ireland.

This generation, my generation, is without doubt the new lost generation, created and shaped by extreme austerity measures and economic stagnation. We now must accept a type of poverty we never knew before, never wanted and never thought we would see. Growing up in the boom times we were all guaranteed a top class education, a job for life, a nice house, a big car, and a fat pension to keep us warm in our old age. All of that now seems ridiculously far fetched as hard austerity measures ensure that the Irish education system slumps to below average standards; employment is only for the lucky few; the property market is an extinct element of the economy, the high cost of car

tax and petrol causes many to opt for the use of their own legs, and pensions have been eaten up the banks. In the Ireland of 2011 economic growth has been crushed while spending has all but ceased and a generation is slipping away to waste. The human consequences of such harsh economic measures have seen a reverse in population growth in two ways and both are heartbreaking. The first cause of a sharp population decline is emigration and the second is suicide.

In the first nine months of 2011, some 65,000 people have left Ireland. The Economic and Social Research Institute predicts 120,000 will emigrate in 2012 (*The Telegraph,* 12-9-11).

Since the beginning of the economic crises suicide has steadily and worryingly risen. "Ireland has the fourth highest suicide rate in Europe" (*Irish Times,* 12-2-2011). More and more people, men and women of any age in any county across Ireland are deciding that the better option is to take their own life. Suicide is affecting all classes and without doubt it is linked to the recession. It straddles the class divide. So far this year in Ireland people from all walks of life have taken their own lives. From the well off to the working class, suicide is reaching into all sectors of a desperate society and taking grip on unstable minds rocked by recession. Suicide is a factor plaguing this country ever more under this rotten fiscal climate, and while the loss of a generation to emigration may be lamented as a general perspective of this recession the real tragic cost is the surge in suicide rates among those who are unemployed or face unemployment; they are laden down with debt and face a bleak outlook. Just as everyone in Ireland knows of someone who has emigrated, they also know of someone who has attempted or succeeded in taking his or her own life. So when some may state that austerity may work, the reality is that it is at a high cost to individuals and communities as a whole.

The budget was delivered by the Irish Government over two days, December 5th and December 6th, the ninetieth anniversary of the Anglo-Irish treaty. It was the first time ever in history that it took two days to deliver a budget for a state with a population of just fewer than five million people. Cuts were made to education and health; a fuel allowance for pensioners was cut down; and the cost of college registration fees rose along with the gradual phasing out of maintenance grants for less well off students. Cuts were made to single parents' allowance and disability allowance. Taxes were introduced for almost everything and anything; a water tax was introduced, as was a house tax. The only tax they didn't introduce was a scratch your ass tax. The aim of this budget was to rebuild the Irish economy and strengthen a poor society, but the truth of the matter is that the vicious program of deep cuts and high taxes serves only to weaken society even more.

While Irish society has come crashing back down to earth with an unmerciful bang, I do revel in the thought that at least we are all no longer in a two tiered society created by the Celtic tiger. I may even begrudgingly revel in the fact that the upper classes, which were created from the excesses of the Celtic tiger years, are now merely middle class while the middle class have joined the ranks of the working class and the working class who struggled before now must struggle even harder; and that is where my reveling ends because now the poor get poorer and the rich run away—the bankers who got us into this mess along with the corrupt politicians, they are all gone now but unfortunately they are not gone to jail. They have left a society that created greed, thrived on greed, and now has been utterly and completely consumed by greed. If only we took control of ourselves and managed our good fortune and wealth all those years ago, if we even shared it equally, then maybe we might not be in this mess right now. Those who had control of our purse strings during the boom years got completely drunk on money. It was wasted on projects not needed such as the Luas tram system in Dublin, a city that already had a good bus transport and suburban train system, a city which could fit into London several times over. While money could have been spent on more sensible projects, they were instead sidelined in favor of lavish and almost nonsensical things. In my own city of Cork, a quay wall next to the city hospital collapsed during mass flooding in 2009 and it remains unfixed.

There is a sense protruding through modern Irish society that we have been dragged up and drawn out and are now no more good. That sense of worthlessness hangs heavy over Irish society, a society with no anticipation of hope. This country is now, essentially, a hopeless one. The Cry from the Occupy movement is that if you won't stand for something, you will fall for everything; the truth of the matter is that the Irish fell when the banks fell back in 2008 and we were already on our knees when the International Monetary Fund arrived on our door-step in 2010.

The idea within the Irish government is that it can get the country back on track over the next four years through harsh budgets. In order to meet the financial targets imposed by the IMF-EU-ECB troika, the government set out plans to raise 1.6 billion Euros through taxes while making savings of 2.2 billion through savage spending cuts. The sectors most affected by such cuts included health and education. While suicide rates are soaring, cuts in mental health programs have been made and no longer can we claim to be the island of saints and scholars, as the education system is ultimately crumbling under such harsh austerity measures.

While Ireland is battling with its own domestic issues such as the collapse in social morale, Germany is emerging into the most dynamic economy in Europe and slowly becoming one of the most powerful in the world. Before the budget was delivered to the Irish public, it was firstly given a look over by those in the Bundestag. Our economic sovereignty is gone and so too it seems is our general dignity. While bailouts have been pushed upon countries such as Spain and while Ireland and Greece have already had to induce such a thing, Germans do not moan because they reap the benefits of securing cheap outlets for their goods. As Germany grows, others such as Ireland shrink back in to pre-modern economic standards. The German economic empire is expanding across Europe while hollow talks of trying to re-unify Europe take place. We are living in ironic times indeed.

But the real enemy is not this or that nation-state: it is capitalism. James Connolly, a founder of Irish socialism, knew that very well: "The day has passed for patching up the capitalist system; it must go."

While the wrangles continue in Europe about how to save the Euro currency, high taxes have been piled upon the Irish public, cuts in the health and education sector have been made and Ireland is still in the darkest depths of an economic mire. The good times may not come back for a long time if they will come back at all. That notion is uncertain but what is a certified fact is that as long as harsh austerity measures are made, emigrations will continue among the Irish youth and the rate of suicide will continue to rise. What would those who signed the Anglo-Irish treaty ninety years ago think of their country and people now? Did they ever envision a nation destroyed by banks, a nation consumed by greed, a nation under the thumb of Europe? Never would they have thought that an Irish budget would have to go to Germany first in order to get the okay before it was passed onto the Irish people; and never would they have thought that the prospect of emigration would be as ever prevalent today as it was when our ancestors fled during the great famine.

Emigration started off in the early days of the recession as a sort of taboo word among the youth; now it a word which is widespread, so much so that you cannot stroll down an Irish street in any city in any town without hearing of someone's daughter or son taking flight to a better life in places like Canada or Australia. Who knows where the next five or ten years will bring Ireland, who knows what currency we will be using or indeed what flag we will be flying? But what will be certain is that the majority of this generation will not be there to witness it because they would have emigrated to other lands for a better life and all because right now in Ireland, whatever you do in this country, don't get sick, don't get old, and don't be young as harsh austerity measures will not guarantee you a decent life on the emerald isle.

Footnotes