

“TAKE CHARGE OF CHANGE”

**BEING YOUNG
& IRISH 2012**

TAKE CHARGE OF CHANGE

‘Being Young and Irish’

A report on President Michael D. Higgins’
consultation ‘Being Young and Irish’ with
young people between May-November 2012



“I hope that once the seminar is over, people with power keep getting bombarded with these ideas”

“I believe that the idea of having young people involved in the future of Ireland is an ingenious idea, and I would love to see even more of it. I think it would be an incredible idea to have groups or clubs set up in schools to discuss our ideas for the future”

“We can stand up and fight until our voices are heard”.

This document was produced for the Being Young and Irish Implementation Group at Áras an Uachtaráin by

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FOREWORD BY PRESIDENT MICHAEL D. HIGGINS

I initiated the 'Being Young and Irish' consultation with the young people of Ireland because of my belief that we are in a period of immense change. How that change is interpreted and how we as citizens respond is crucial to our present challenging circumstances. Our response will define our future.

In the change that takes place, the creativity, the imagination, the decencies, of young people must have an opportunity of being expressed. To be in charge of change is the challenge that faces all of us citizens in Ireland, in Europe, in our world.

'Being Young and Irish' is an opportunity for young people to build a vision of the Irishness which they see as best for all of us in our different generations, now and for the future.

In taking part in 'Being Young and Irish' our young people joined those fellow humans all over the world who believe that a new world with the stamp of humanity can be created.

This report sets out the results of a consultation which took place in Ireland between May 25th and Sept. 29th with young people aged 17 – 26. Young people were invited to share their views on the future of Ireland in writing, through prose or poetry, or through music, or video. In addition, four regional workshops were held in Dublin, Monaghan, Cork and Galway. I would like to say how genuinely impressed and moved I have been by all those I met at the regional workshops, and by the contributions received here in Áras an Uachtaráin.

I would like to thank the researchers at Dublin Institute of Technology for collating the findings of the consultation in the report which follows. I would also like to thank all those who volunteered their time, energy and skills to 'Being Young and Irish'. Most important of all, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the young people who joined workshops, or made contributions to the consultation. By so generously sharing of themselves - their hopes, their concerns, their vision and their vulnerabilities - and by reflecting with their peers on the future of Ireland, they demonstrate the active and inclusive citizenship necessary to transform and renew Ireland in this period of great challenge and change.

Michael D. Higgins
Uachtaráin na hÉireann
President of Ireland

SUMMARY OF CONSULTATION RESULTS

In his inauguration speech on November 11 2011 President Michael D. Higgins said that as part of his Presidency he would host a number of seminars which would reflect and explore themes that went beyond immediate legislative demands but which were important to the shared life of the Irish people. He decided that the first of these Seminars would be built on the theme of 'Being Young and Irish.'

At the launch of a process of consultation to underpin the Seminar, President Higgins invited young people to think together about the way we wish to live with others; the way our institutions must work and serve their purpose for the welfare of all; the way we define what is valuable; and to reflect on the economy and its connection to society. In his invitation President Higgins encouraged young people to share in the shaping of a renewed Ireland:

"The transformation of Ireland needs the commitment and contribution of our young people. Now more than ever we need your energy, your ideas, your ideals, your creativity, your courage. Your country needs your passion, your innovation and your vision."

This report details the many suggestions, ideas and comments made by respondents to President Higgins' 'Being Young and Irish' consultation. A total of two hundred and ninety four people participated in the Regional Workshops. Four hundred and thirty nine individual submissions were received from 17-26 year olds. In addition, six group submissions were received representing the views of seventy four participants. Thirty two individuals engaged with both parts of the process. Thus a total of seven hundred and seventy five, 17 - 26 year olds contributed to the consultation.

Young people aged 17-26 years were asked to respond to three questions:

1. What is your vision for Ireland?
2. What needs to happen to make your vision possible?
3. What can you and other young people do to achieve this vision?

What Is Your Vision For Ireland?

This report details the many components of young people's vision for a future Ireland. Young people's visions of an Ireland of the future were steeped in positive images, thoughts and feelings about Ireland, the Ireland that they want to see come back to take its central place in Europe and the world or to take a new place in the world of the future.

A socially conscious Ireland was some young people's vision, *"a country where the improvement of the living standard of the lowest in society is always a priority", "a country where everyone has an education, ample food, a warm house and freedom from tax slavery and fear of poverty", a country whose citizens fight "for human rights and against all kinds of prejudices and oppression", a caring society, "where those who are vulnerable are supported in every possible way".*

Some sought a *"better mental health system for young people"* while others emphasised the importance of community in charting our future:

"my vision for Ireland, is one that is built upon a foundation of community and a spirit of same. A place where people can rely on each other. An Ireland that supports the people on the ground working within and making a difference at community level. An Ireland that is not measured by financial success but by the progress of its people."

In short, *"an Ireland that looks after its own"*.

Our place on the world stage was also the vision of some. That Ireland would *"become a leading example of a progressive society who simply got on with it"* to a world:

"... that sees us become strong, confident and respected on the world stage. A nation that continues to produce the scholars and innovators that we have had in the past. In a national sense, I want to see Ireland be a country that gives everyone a chance to work; that gives youth a future, and old age a security."

What Needs To Happen To Make Your Vision Possible?

The consultation process generated a number of priority areas of concern, and hundreds of ideas and suggestions for concrete steps that can be taken to bring about positive change in Irish society. These are detailed throughout the report, especially in the section 'Suggestions [for change]'. Not surprisingly, the suggestions closely parallel the main elements of young people's vision for Ireland. The most common areas of concern which emerged across the online, postal and workshop contributions and which are thus discussed in this report are:

- Employment, enterprise, social security, concern with the economy
- Political Reform
- Education

- Equality
- Involve Young People
- Being Positive
- Health
- Community and Civil Society
- Identity as Irish

Employment, enterprise, social security, concern with economy

Young people called for the economy to be stimulated, with an emphasis on job creation and the need to integrate welfare and social protection more closely with inclusivity, enterprise culture and social solidarity. The considerable growth potential in the creative industries, including arts, drama, music, dance and film and the natural creativity of the Irish people was recognised along with the need to harness these strengths to create a global cultural hub. The role of social welfare was mentioned by many young people, who frequently questioned the fairness of its distribution.

Unsurprisingly, there is concern about the burden of private banking debt and its conversion into sovereign debt which reduces social and economic capacity. Furthermore there is concern about the overall economic situation and that the focus of public policy is on stabilising the shock from the banking crisis as opposed to stimulating enterprise and especially youth enterprise. On balance, young people have suggestions that involve mobilizing our social and creative potential. Moreover, a small number of young people emphasized the need for economic development to be driven by a collective sense of purpose; for the “welfare of the people”; that we as a society learn from the errors of the “Celtic Tiger” where private gain has ultimately delivered the “complete enslavement of generations.”



A significant level of concern is raised by young people in relation to the prospects for graduate employment and their perception that current labour market activation schemes are for jobseekers who have already been in the workforce, so excluding new graduates.

Critical here is the need to activate the State in

relation to job creation and the creation of opportunities for graduates to gain experience in industries in which they are training / studying based upon meritocratic principles, as opposed to patronage:

“My parents are not highly educated. We do not have the links required for politics, collegiality or prestige. There is no way up the social ladder. I have the qualifications, results, aptitude, ability and will to be a primary teacher. I cannot secure such a position in this country. My sister is a secondary teacher and she faces the same reality. Enthusiastic graduates become despondent”.

The concern in some of the vision statements is to create a society that is greater than the economy which is driven by a strong sense of social solidarity:

“Employers want to use our energy and desperation, so we work all of the hours available and can't get minimum wage for it. However, every time we want to give up, we remember that our parents are getting older. Someone will have to take care of them, as they did for our grandparents. If we leave, we forsake that care that they have given us. The cycle is broken”.

Political reform

Demand for political reform was also a dominant and recurring theme of submissions. There was a sense that more needs to be done to encourage citizens to become active and engaged both in politics and in civil society. There is a perceived disconnect between young people and politicians and this needs to be addressed: “There is a massive void between the youth of Ireland and their elected representatives”. Young people feel that they are not being heard.

The need for young people to be better informed and more engaged in the political process was expressed by many. The State could facilitate this by, for example, holding elections on a Saturday but it was widely expressed that young people themselves have a responsibility to become involved, to make their voices heard. The need for better communication between politicians and young people was highlighted.

Education

The theme of education was prominent in a large number of submissions. A wide variety of topics were raised but a number of themes recurred repeatedly. Many young people emphasised the importance of education in their submissions and highlighted the need for reform as a priority. The second level system, in particular, was deemed by many not to be ‘fit for purpose’ as it does not prepare people for active citizenship and over-emphasises a narrow set of skills required to perform well in the current Leaving Certificate examination. Most evident was the sense that education needs

to be broader and to help citizens become open-minded, self-reliant, open to becoming involved in society and being active citizens:

“at the moment our system does not encourage a broad view on life or an open mind. It suppresses creativity and independence and it does not educate them for life”.

There was harsh criticism of the rote learning that is perceived to be involved in preparing for the Leaving Certificate examination and repeatedly participants called for the system to foster more rounded, independent, creative and critical thinking.

Access and cost were the key issues raised regarding third level education. Access was mainly related to the points system, a system which is seen to be inequitable and hugely problematic. There was an overwhelming sense that access to third level should be free of cost:

“Colleges should be for everyone not just one who can afford the chosen luxury of gaining a university place. Those who haven’t reached their fullest potential academically or personally must be given extra help in order to make this so”.

In addition, as the above quote shows, there was a strong understanding that access is socially differentiated and this is not acceptable. The notion of introducing university fees was unanimously opposed. There were several calls for the grants system to be maintained and improved.



Equality

The theme of equality was one of the most prominent in both submissions and in the regional workshops. Young people emphasised the need for respect for individual rights and freedom of expression and many related a vision of Ireland that embraces multiculturalism.

The following quote crystallises the thoughts of many participants in the area of Equality:

“My vision for Ireland of the future is one where the intrinsic value of each individual is recognised and where those in power strive to fulfil the basic needs of every individual and to respect and protect their basic rights”.

Various structural issues are blamed for stifling Ireland’s move towards a more equal society:

“Ireland desperately needs a constitution which represents all members of our society regardless of race, religion, gender or sexual orientation.”

Involve young people

Young people have identified that there needs to be a structured forum where the youth voice can be promoted, encouraged and fostered. Many participants praised the Being Young and Irish initiative, and called for further related initiatives to bring the process further. Young people have a deep desire to contribute to politics and society and are seeking to develop both a culture of civic participation and structures that support its implementation.

There is an overall sense that young people are not listened to:



“Young people need first to be given the opportunity to be listened to. It is near impossible to get your voice heard in our society ... there might be a lack of participation [which is] completely understandable ... they are not shown any respect”.

The suggestion is that many opportunities are missed by leaders who ignore the youth: “People always assume we are young and immature, yet we have more bright ideas than they think”. This goes beyond creativity, to encompass practical solutions: “I believe that the youth of this country are an underused tool in establishing our stability”.

There was a confident tone of defiance in many young people’s submissions: “The government needs to be willing and ready to listen to the young people of their country”.

The following submission highlights the need for young people to see an opportunity to participate:

“Samhlaím ar tír ina dtuigeann daoine óga go bhfuil ról le n-imirt acu sa shochaí. Breathnaím timpeall orm féin gach lá agus feicim daoine le cumas agus muinín. An fhadhb atá ann ná ní fheiceann na daoine seo dótháin deiseanna rannphairtíochta ann. Cloiseann siad na dróch-scéalta ar fad faoi stad reatha na tíre agus mothaíonn siad díspregtha i leith an ról atá acu ann. [I imagine a country where young people understand that they have a role to play in society. Around me every day I see people with ability and confidence. The problem is these people do not see enough opportunities for participation. They hear all the bad stories and this deters them from participating].”

Being Positive

The importance of being positive was repeatedly highlighted by the young people. Young people expressed a strong need for optimism in envisaging an Ireland of the future and a sense of disillusionment with the negativity they experience around them.

Most references to our heritage however were in the form of expressing a deep awareness of our country as a great nation and our people as resourceful, competent, well educated and owning a strong sense of community spirit.

“We have an amazing willingness to make the very best out of a situation that so often seems impossible. That is why today I know that we are not only going to take on the difficulties we face but do so in such a way that ensures Ireland will once more be a strong, vibrant and truly brilliant place to live”.

Many young people asked us to recall events in the country that evoked a feeling of pride in our country:

“... the carnival atmosphere when Ireland qualified for soccer championships, or the feeling each county gets when they win an All-Ireland or each parish’s swagger when they win the county – even at Junior ... every year without fail, we have an opportunity to celebrate Ireland’s birth”.

Health

Submissions on health included mental health and suicide and mental health services. In addition issues of alcohol, smoking and drug use were raised under the broad theme of health.

Mental health and suicide were raised and many of the comments made were made in the first person. Reflecting this one participant points out:

“Too many people are dying because they aren’t aware of the help that’s there and too often, they can’t get the help they need when they look. I am a young person whose mental health service does not help their mental health. I do not want to end up as another number among the hundreds who take their lives each year. We need change and we need it now.”

Overall regarding healthcare, respondents suggested that “the system is wrong”:

“We need to have a broader discussion on disability, health and mental health than simply how much they get in the budget (which of course is important!)”. Also, “We need to have broader discourse as a society as to how we view people with disabilities and mental health problems and work to challenge misconceptions through education.”

There were a range of submissions related to various aspects of alcohol, covering themes such as alcohol abuse, binge drinking and underage drinking.

The following submission summarises a range of views:

“Alcohol is the drug of choice among youth. Many young people are experiencing the consequences of drinking too much, at too early an age. As a result, underage drinking is a leading public health problem in this country”.

Community and civil society

The young people strongly believe in active citizenship, volunteering and helping others and see these values as a strong part of their understanding of being Irish.

There is a strong sense in the submissions that the sense of community is something that has been lost during the boom years. Here, submissions point out that while individuals need to be valued

within a shared sense of solidarity, individualism is an insufficient basis for the providing the spirit and energy towards recovery and social progress. It is this spirit of togetherness in community that appears to give meaning and belonging to individual lives in a variety of settings, from the cradle to the grave:

“Importance is the very thing we crave in life we want to look into the eyes of our fellow countrymen/women and see that they want us to work for them (employment/colleague), socialise with them (friends), share our lives with them (loved ones) and why not money comes and goes but that feeling remains right to our very last breath”.

Identity as Irish

Contributions on this theme fall into two broad categories:

- (i) In light of the current economic situation, unemployment and emigration, there is a questioning of what constitutes Irish identity
- (ii) The Irish language is what distinguishes Irishness but that we need an approach to Irish that incorporates it into everyday life as a way of helping people to be proud of their Irishness.

The theme of promoting Ireland abroad was raised by many. Young people talked about how Ireland could rely on its students, graduates and emigrant population to promote Ireland.

“Most importantly we need to recognise that what we consider to be inherently Irish will not and does not have to be retained as part of the constant process of change. We can pick and choose together the values which will make all of our lives worth living and create a new form of Irishness which builds on the experiences and values of the past. Our ambitions should be free from historical hang-up but with the benefit of historical hindsight”.

A number of young people suggested a celebration of Irishness, a national day where Irish food, culture, language, music, sport and dancing could be show-cased in Ireland and internationally. The Irish language is important to a sense of Irishness, but many are concerned that the current approach to the teaching of Irish in mainstream education may be counter-productive.

What Can You And Other Young People Do To Achieve This Vision?

As for the first question (What is your vision for Ireland?), the report details many suggestions from young people as to what concrete steps they can take to achieve their vision for Ireland. Many mentioned voluntary work and bringing about change starting with small steps in their families and communities. Joining political parties, community initiatives, voting, and encouraging their peers on healthy behaviours were also frequent suggestions.



At the Dublin workshop participants noted that they could:

“ Take social responsibility / lead by example / Be an ambassador to be proud of who you are, listen and inspire, mentor others / Identify other Role Models of Young People who are creating change”

In the Cork workshop, the priority suggestions were “volunteering, getting involved, use your vote.” In Galway the top items noted by participants for actions by young people were:

- “Get educated! From primary school up ‘educate for life not exams’
- Establish youth forums like this to discuss topics and feedback solutions; and
- Buy Irish and be Irish, speak Irish.”

In contrast to these views, the top ranked view of young people in the Monaghan workshop regarding their own contribution focused on lack of power: “We the young generation of Ireland feel we are powerless to instigate any real change due to a lack of respect for our opinions.” More positive suggestions were also noted in Monaghan and, as in the other settings, they are dominated by ‘get involved’, ‘use our voices’, and ‘use our vote’.