

Claiming our Future

November 2010

One hundred tables waited in evenly spaced rows for the one thousand people who filed into the RDS, armed only with their hopes of a better future. The venue was a giant hall the size of an aircraft hanger, the task improbable - reshaping Irish political life. Most people had no idea what to expect. A stage had been set up halfway down the hall, not to indulge the usual spokespeople but to welcome a gay and lesbian choir, a trio of young Ballyfermot rappers, Mary Coughlan and soul singer Shaz Oye.

It was billed as the first small step toward building an inclusive social movement, a new way of 'doing' politics, whatever that might be. By the end of the day one thing had become apparent - the process was critical to the outcome. Gather one thousand highly motivated people to discuss politics in an open forum and the results will be painfully predictable - a small number of people (mostly middle-aged men) will dominate the debate and just before the end someone will propose a radical new idea which would never have occurred to us - a 'mass mobilization' to really show the bastards the door. The path to political irrelevance is paved with ever dwindling 'mass protests' lacking the momentum of a broad based popular movement. Cart and horse.

The gathering grew from discussions between environmental and social justice groups, trade unions and community organisations "exploring how best to cooperate and coordinate endeavours for a more equal, inclusive and sustainable Ireland", an agenda wide enough to pilot an airplane through - hence the hangar.

As the participants arrived into the hall, each one was given a sticker with a number corresponding to their table for the day. It quickly became apparent that the success of the event would depend on the skills of the facilitator at each table, explaining, steering and guiding the process. The position of facilitator is a much neglected figure in campaigns and meeting rooms. It may sound strange but today in Ireland, as citizens struggle to come to terms with a scary and rapidly changing set of ground rules for survival, we need talented facilitators to cut the crap and help us find a common language and common ground. And maybe a psychologist or two.

There was a brief hello from the stage before we turned our attention to

our table companions, all of them strangers. This seemed like a good omen in a country where political events feel more like alternative family gatherings, with familiar faces everywhere. The facilitator read out the ground rules for discussion, a crucial first move in which everyone present committed themselves to listen to others and not to impose themselves on the group. It has become standard operating procedure at public meetings to go on and on about listening to others but then a handful of people go right ahead anyway and walk all over the room, metaphorically speaking. Go to any meeting about any major issue and there they will be, the same faces, letting us know at length what we already know, before outlining their masterplan, yes, another protest march. This time though, when our feet hit the streets, the bastards won't know what hit them.

The nine rules of engagement seemed obvious but the act of reading them out loud and asking each participant to endorse them, also out loud, served a purpose - *"No one or two persons may dominate or take over the discussion and try and impose their views. The facilitator and other participants at a table are entitled to ask someone to be more restrained if they are dominating the discussion or trying to impose their views."* There it is. How many meetings have I sat through, silently begging some know all to shut up, scanning the room as the big switch off took place, lacking the tools (or nerve) to actually step in and take action.

(As I said, a psychologist or two may be required)

And so the starting whistle sounded and off we went, destination unknown. As the day progressed the shared sense of listening and not imposing produced notable results at my table with just one notable exception, of which more in a while. The objective of the day, apart from meeting and sharing, was to establish a set of common values and a set of potential policy choices which might serve as a rallying point for collective action.

The nature and size of the gathering obliged the organisers to prepare some of the options for discussion in advance but it didn't feel like an ambush. Of course there is no hope of satisfying everyone - especially me. I want to see the back of consumer capitalism and I'm prepared to pay the ultimate price - handing over my beloved book and record collection.

This could take a while to achieve so in the meantime I'd be satisfied if the capitalist beast was chained up in the basement on a tight leash and treated with the caution one reserves for the family paedophile. At some point in the afternoon each of us was given a red, green and yellow piece of card and a show of hands requested. If you raised the red card you wanted out, a green card signalled happy happy while the yellow card said steady on, I'm still in the room but watching my back. A sea of green cards filled the hall and my own yellow seemed like an act of selfish spoilerism.

Each table had a computer which would be used to input the outcome of the discussion. We began by choosing five core values out of thirteen options. It quickly became apparent that Human Dignity, Accountability, Solidarity and Equality would be frontrunners for collective consensus, moral compass points for the long road ahead. Once the definites were agreed upon there was room for one more, so we discussed the rest and added a few that weren't on the list. I argued for 'self reliance' as a starting point for securing economic sovereignty and reducing reliance on foreign capital. Someone else at the table considered that one a negative in an interconnected world where we rely on others for food and fuel. Indeed, but the real price of our dependence on cheap food is carried by others who face overwhelming daily hardship. If we grow food for ourselves, then maybe farmers elsewhere can do the same, instead of producing cash crops for export to maintain our standard of living. Someone else suggested that an emphasis on self reliance could lead to a society in which the strong trampled on the weak although we seem to be doing very well in achieving that outcome within the current economic growth model.

This is a woefully broad and general overview of a more nuanced discussion.

The facilitator listened carefully and by gathering in the various voices and opinions was able to repeat and restate them in a way which made it obvious where the general mood of the table lay in relation to each proposal. This process pre-empted a straight vote which fosters a mood of winner/loser, included/excluded. We discussed Justice, Enterprise and Participation, the latter finding its way into our final selection.

The buzzer sounded, we completed our task and were rewarded with

Mary Coughlan onstage delivering a couple of knockout tracks, one of them about the 'Maggies' of the Magdalen Laundries. The singer reminded the audience of the distance travelled since the 1970s, battles fought and social legislation won. Then it was back to work.

Session two concerned the economy and the environment, income, wealth and work, with participants selecting a number of policy choices. Our table had little difficulty in reaching agreement on the following two: *'Change the current development model and define and measure progress in a balanced way that stresses economic security and social and environmental sustainability'* and *'regulate banking to change the culture from one of speculative banking to one where currently state-owned banks and new local banking models focus on guaranteeing credit to local enterprises and communities.'*

The only other major talking point was a general agreement that there could be no prospect of economic security without stateownership of natural resources.

In the area of income, wealth and work, everyone at the table agreed that it was vital to *'achieve greater income equality and reduce poverty through wage, tax and income policies that support maximum and minimum income thresholds.'* The second option selected was to *'prioritise high levels of decent employment with a stimulus package to maximize job creation in a green/social economy.'* My own choice would have been to *'recognise and reward all meaningful work, enable more flexible work arrangements and greater job sharing, and care work to be shared more equally between men and women.'* However the table (and the entire gathering) plumped for the first two, a reminder that you can't always get what you want even if you know your ideas are far superior to everyone else's. As the discussion evolved there was a refreshing absence of 'speechifying', that chronic condition which sees people turn up at events and rave at length upon the ills of the system. Even though the speechifier knows that we all know everything he (it's usually a 'he') is talking about and that we all have so many things to do besides extend the life of another meeting, the speeches must be permitted to reach the end of their natural lives. You might call it the Liveline Syndrome and the outcome is inevitable - paralysis and the big switch off.

Right at the beginning of the meeting, as we introduced ourselves to our

table companions, we were asked to express our hopes and fears for the day. The most common fear expressed was that the initiative would be hijacked by small but vocal marginal political interests, too obvious to mention, those doomed ultras eager to latch onto any gathering of more than three people in a room. This is why the skilled facilitation on the day was so important ('process' again, such a dull word, such an important concept) and should be an integral aspect of future gatherings, not just national events, but smaller, county and community meetings also. A spirit of generosity prevailed at our table (and after speaking to participants at a dozen other tables, the same spirit was apparently present) which generated a sense of equal involvement, a rare outcome indeed among activist circles in Ireland. What this meant was that each member of the table was predisposed to speak less and listen more, to give and take and accept other opinions with good grace. This lesson of learning to talk together without needing to dominate has a contagious effect and at some point in the day I had an unusual thought - apart from sharing some values (and disagreeing on others) I actually liked the people at the table and would work with them again. I didn't need them to share all my beliefs and ideas. I've come away from too many meetings at which I've been, feeling, to paraphrase Charles Haughey speaking to Hot Press, I'd like *'to throw a few fuckers off a cliff'*. The notion of building affinity rather than simply bringing together like minded individuals is a key element in sustaining a campaign beyond occasional showcase public events.

The next part of this session was important in that it set out the terrain not just for an alternative economic model but alternative mechanisms for engaging with political life, which, in its current form, excludes the vast majority of people, beginning with single parents and anyone parenting on an equal basis. The issues in question regarded Governance and Access to Services and Public Sector renewal. One option jumped out from the page - *'Reform representative political institutions to enhance accountability, equality, capacity, and efficiency of national and local decision makers.'*

Again we were faced with an obvious and desirable principle, but one so general that it could easily be expressed by the same political parties who have systematically denied citizens any meaningful participation in the democratic process.

Yellow card.

The second option selected was to *'Develop participatory and deliberative forms of citizens' engagement in public governance and enhance democratic participation by fostering the advocacy role of civil society organizations, civic and ethics education in all school levels and a diverse media.'* I am simply naming some of the policy choices without comment as a follow up piece will look in more detail at the scale of the task ahead and some possible steps to help move in the direction of fulfilling these ambitious pledges.

There was no problem at the table in finding consensus on the second part of the session, involving access to services. What we want and what we need - *'universal access to quality healthcare, childcare and services for older people'* and *'invest in equality in access to and participation in all levels of education (preschool to university).'*

And that was it.

Almost.

The final final task was for each table to offer up five ideas for continuing the work of the gathering. There was general agreement on the need to go back to our family, community and county and spread the word, explain what had been discussed and seek a broader consensus if this initiative is to have any future. There was one representative at the table who self-identified as a member of an organized left group and he came up with a brilliant idea - another protest. The table listened politely but it was clear that the proposal had no support. *'A protest by all means'* said someone, anxious to meet our companion halfway, *'but only when the movement has momentum and shape.'* Here and now, public protest, with ever dwindling numbers of increasingly disillusioned participants, is a recipe for irrelevance. The issue went round the houses but was not withdrawn, despite the obvious lack of appetite at the table. And so, after a day of proposing and withdrawing our ideas, swallowing pride and building affinity, on this issue alone our table took a vote - each of us said No, one after another. I suspect that if this proposal had been made at an open, public meeting, the passionate demand for protest would have been carried, and another marginal protest would have taken place. And only one person at our table would have been at it.

So there it is, one highly personal perspective on the Claiming Our Future conference, just one of a thousand. I still have the yellow card in my hand, but I will go forth and multiply, talk it up, talk it down, conscious that the tasks ahead are urgent, and that while all the options may not be entirely to my taste, there is one option we can no longer afford - that of sitting on the sidelines.