



The majority believe assisted suicide should be legal

Today is the third and final day's coverage of the 2010 Irish Times/Behaviour & Attitudes Social Poll.

The focus of this final installment is on those elements of our value system which the body politic has a direct influence on.

At the broadest level, those polled were asked to rank in order of importance to them a list of seven issues of socio-political concern.

With the number of individuals on the Live Register now standing at 455,000 and still increasing, it is perhaps no surprise that unemployment emerges as the single greatest concern to Irish adults today. We know from ongoing qualitative focus group research that most people in the country have been affected either directly or indirectly by job losses or reduced working hours, and it is our belief that until unemployment ceases to rise, consumer confidence will continue to languish at its current historically low levels.

With four in ten of all adults nominating unemployment as their number one concern today, it is somewhat poignant to note that this figure rises to two-thirds of those aged 18-24 years, many of whom will have just left school or are still in full time education, facing into a bleak future in Ireland.

Apart from unemployment, the ongoing financial crisis and past and impending Government cutbacks are also preying on people's minds. Undoubtedly the growing sense of uncertainty surrounding the ultimate cost of the banks' bailout, coupled with fears of a new wave of swingeing spending cuts and tax increases in December's budget have spooked people in recent weeks. Until people receive clarity on these issues, they will maintain a tight hold on any savings they have accrued over the last year or so, delaying even further a recovery in domestic consumer spending.

It is surely a sign of the times that more than twice as many people are concerned about the effects of emigration from Ireland than they are about the immigration of non-nationals into the country. Indeed, the ESRI has forecast a net outward migration figure of approximately sixty-five thousand people for the full year 2010. There appears to be a very real danger that, as emigration to recovering economies such as the United States increases over the next number of years, we may be facing into a 1980's style 'brain drain', which in itself would have a detrimental effect on the country's long-term economic prognosis.



Incidentally, it is interesting to note how few people are even remotely concerned with the reunification of Ireland, all other things being considered. While the subject never rated highly in opinion polls south of the border over the last fifteen years or so, it seems that the fundamental aspiration for a united Ireland which so many people harboured during the course of the troubles and beyond has dissipated considerably since the successful conclusion of the Peace process.

As the Government and opposition parties work towards formulating policies to successfully tackle the financial crisis in general and unemployment in particular, they should take note that the framing of such policy in a transparent fashion, and for the right reasons is of paramount importance to the Irish electorate.

People have clearly lost all sense of trust in the political establishment and it is crucial to them that future decisions concerning the Irish economy are based on clear and cogent arguments, backed up by convincing and credible economic data.

The final section of this year's social poll looks at people's views of the Irish Constitution, and which elements, if any, need to be amended to reflect prevailing social mores.

On the surface, it would appear that the Constitution would benefit from a review. For example, six in ten of those surveyed suggest that the Constitution is in need of 'some amendment', with a further one-fifth suggesting it is not fit for purpose, and needs to be rewritten.

While clearly an extremely sensitive issue, people's personal views of abortion are worth noting within this context. When asked how they would react if a friend came to them privately to ask for their assistance in having an abortion abroad, half of all Irish adults indicated unequivocally that they would help her do so. Indeed, a majority of Irish people up to approximately fifty years of age would assist a friend in seeking an abortion abroad, with just one third aged fifty-five or more suggesting that they would refuse to help her, and try to persuade her to have the baby.

Another area of legislation which may warrant attention relates to the right of terminally ill patients who are in intense pain to end their own lives. When questioned about the matter, it emerges that a majority (55%) of Irish people are in favour of doctor-assisted suicide in extreme circumstances, with just one third diametrically opposed to the notion. It is, however, the case that support for such legislation is significantly higher amongst those aged under forty-five years. Conversely, opinion is broadly split on this question amongst those aged fifty-five years or more. This pattern of response does beg the question as to whether more heed should be taken of the views of older people who are arguably more likely to be personally affected by such legislation, and less to the younger individuals who may be considering the issue from a theoretical rather than a practical perspective.



People were also polled as to whether they would support allowing doctors to assume they have consent to take organs from deceased patients, unless they had been specifically instructed not to do so. Again, just over half of all Irish people would support the introduction of such a 'presumed consent' rule, although a sizeable minority (approaching four in ten of all adults) are opposed to it.

With little difference in opinion emerging here between the socio demographic groupings, there would certainly appear to be a case for beginning a debate around this and other issues researched in today's poll, with the pros and cons of such legislation clearly elucidated as part of the process.

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