

Opinion Poll

LIFESTYLE STATEMENTS: INDICATE HOW MUCH YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THESE STATEMENTS DESCRIBING YOURSELF AND LIFE IN IRELAND TODAY



Dublin's Grafton Street yesterday.
Photograph: Matt Kavanagh

Recession affecting all parts of society



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ANALYSIS

More than eight in 10 people surveyed want Ireland Inc to start believing in itself again

FIELDWORK FOR the last Behaviour & Attitudes/Irish Times Social Poll was conducted throughout August 2008. The poll focused on the views and opinions of Irish men regarding life in Ireland as we approached the end of the decade, and how they were coping with an array of societal pressures.

One of the overriding findings was that survey respondents were generally happy with their lot, and quite capable of juggling the pressures of career, family and personal wellbeing.

Within weeks of conducting that poll, we had witnessed the

collapse of Lehman Brothers in the US, the onset of the global credit crunch, and the virtual implosion of the Irish economy.

Since then, numerous rounds of research conducted by Behaviour & Attitudes would suggest that we have lurched from a state of shock at the scale of economic devastation visited upon us within such a short period of time, to one of despair as we struggle to simply make ends meet.

It is within this historically unique context that it was decided to focus in this year's poll on the effect that the events of the last 12 months has had on the general public's living standards, the practical steps they have taken to counteract the effects of the recession and their general psychological demeanour.

At the most fundamental level, today's poll confirms what the monthly Live Register and unemployment figures have been telling us each month since the beginning of the year.

At least one in four opinion poll respondents indicated that either they, or someone else in their household has lost their job as a direct result of the recession.

In other words, at least 800,000 people have been directly affected by job losses over the last 18 months or so, spread evenly across all age groups between 18 and 54 years.

In addition, more than one-fifth

of all Irish adults aged 18 years plus tell us that the number of hours they work in an average week has been reduced as a direct result of the recession.

Of this section of the population (equating to just under three-quarters of a million people), working hours have been slashed by more than 40 per cent on average.

Again, this would be in line with anecdotal evidence which would suggest that many employees were placed on half-time working hours as business revenues declined sharply from January of this year.

Interestingly, those who have been placed on reduced working hours are spread evenly across all socio-economic groupings.

When we add in those people whose levels of pay have been reduced, we can estimate that a total of 1.1 million Irish adults have experienced a sudden reduction in personal income – and this is before we begin to include those who have lost their jobs altogether.

When we consider that every person who experiences such a drop in income is responsible for one or two further dependants, it becomes clear that this recession has had a significant impact on the great majority of the population.

One of the first questions on the poll gauged levels of

agreement with a series of recession-related attitudinal statements. At one level, the results of this section of the poll are quite bleak. For example, more than seven in 10 of all Irish adults indicate that not only has Ireland crashed from boom to bust within a matter of months, they believe the recession in Ireland is worse than it is in most other European countries.

The equivalent of 770,000 Irish people feel the pressures of the economic downturn have had a negative effect on their physical health, while a similar number admit to having become quite depressed.

It may therefore appear to be entirely incongruous that 73 per cent of those surveyed claimed to be quite content with their way of life, with more than eight in 10 urging Ireland Inc to start believing in itself again.

In reality, the tendency of Irish people to maintain an overarching positive outlook as the economic fabric of the country falls apart is one which has been apparent to us as researchers since the middle of 2009.

Indeed, many research participants will tell us that the events of recent months have prompted a reassessment of their value system, and allowed them gain a perspective on the more important things in life which have been lost during the frenetic

days of the Celtic Tiger. Many people believe that the wealth generated over the previous decade had been artificially inflated by way of an overheated property boom and an inordinate amount of cheap credit. As such, the recent crash in fortunes can be construed as something of a natural readjustment, whereby reduced standards of living will be counterbalanced by an enhanced quality of life.

This is not, of course, to suggest that we do not wish to see an end to the recession, insofar as the vast majority of people are understandably fraught with anxiety in relation to their own, or a member of their immediate family's job security. Within this context, peoples' views as to the steps that need to be taken to stabilise the country's finances make interesting reading.

Of five potential cost-saving routes researched, the most popular was a reduction in public sector wage levels, with just over half of all Irish adults agreeing that it is necessary.

In addition, more people agree than disagree with the notion of some kind of carbon tax being introduced (44 per cent agree; 37 per cent disagree), with such a tax more popular amongst those aged 18–24 years, and from a mid to higher socio-economic background.

The evidence from this poll is



that the general public is staunchly opposed to any reductions in social welfare payments, with just under two-thirds of all adults disagreeing that such reductions are now necessary. While opposition to any such reductions is stronger amongst the lower socio-economic groupings (including those reliant on social welfare payments), just under six in 10 of all white collar and professional workers are also opposed to the idea.

Perhaps not surprisingly, almost half of the population is opposed to the introduction of a property tax, although one-third are in favour. The fact that as many working class as middle class individuals are opposed to

the reintroduction of third-level fees (a majority in both cases) would appear to contradict the notion that free third-level education has been of little real benefit to those from the lower socio-economic groupings.

The final section of today's poll coverage focuses on specific efforts people have made to help them cope with the effects of the economic downturn over the last 12 months or so. Many of the findings here are as we might have predicted. For example, more than one-third of all Irish people had been considering buying a new or newer car in 2009, but put that decision on hold for the time being.

Meanwhile, one in four claim they are now maintaining/servicing their own car rather than sending it to a garage. Similarly, the increase in the purchase of more own brand grocery products, and the tendency of grocery shoppers to spread their custom over a greater number of outlets with a view to saving money, is by now well documented.

The number of people growing fruit and vegetables in their own garden, at an estimated three-quarters of a million individuals, does however seem high.

Earlier this year, I was fortunate enough to have been involved in the Ideas Campaign, a citizen-based initiative established

by Aileen O'Toole. One of the tasks of the steering group was to trawl through the many thousands of ideas members of the public had suggested might help reinvigorate the ailing economy. The number of ideas relating to the establishment of community allotments for the growing of fruit and vegetables was one of the most revealing outcomes of the exercise.

In fact, most of those who proposed this idea did so on the basis that it would serve to give those who had recently been made redundant a sense of purpose, at the same time revitalising the ancient custom of "meitheal" – all elements of the community pulling together for the common good.

Other changes in behaviour reported by our survey respondents, whether it be making alterations to clothes rather than buying new ones or making gifts and presents at home, also imply a drift back towards more old fashioned values.

This is not to suggest that the Irish public is in the throes of a profound spiritual epiphany, but it does explain to some extent our stubbornly positive outlook on life and all it has thrown at us since September 2008!

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