

ENGAGING THE IRISH DIASPORA ELITES IN IRELAND'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD?

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In recent years, the role of diasporas in the economic development of their homeland has been a growing area of interest for research and policies.¹ Even though the nature and the scope of diaspora contributions can vary significantly, it is overwhelmingly accepted that their input in their homeland's economic development has been positive. Little attention has been devoted, however, to the possible downsides of such processes. Indeed, the case of Ireland shows that involving diaspora business elites in the homeland's economic affairs can be two-edged. In September 2009, a year after Ireland had entered a major economic crisis, the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs organised the Irish Global Economic Forum with a view to getting the advice of Irish diaspora business elites on how to reposition the Irish economy for the upturn. The decision to consult the *crème de la crème* of the Irish diaspora on economic matters was not without precedent. At the start of the 1990s, the Irish government set up the Ireland-America Economic Advisory Board, which was entrusted with a similar mission. Nevertheless, the substance of the recommendations they made to the Irish government was quite different from those offered by the 2009 Forum. We will also see that Irish diaspora elites have been willing to help in the context of the Forum and its follow-up, but this is not without strings attached.

The Global Irish Economic Forum: Taking the Contribution of the Irish Diaspora to the Economy One Step Further

To ask the Irish diaspora business elites for advice on the economy is not a novel idea. In 1992, the Irish government set up the Ireland-America Economic Advisory Board, a little-known group of very influential Irish-American businessmen (DD 13 Oct 1992, col. 866).² At that time Ireland was one of the poorest states of the European Union, but the Irish authorities were striving to lay the foundation for national economic recovery after a decade marked by high unemployment, emigration, and the steady worsening of public finances. Ireland's economic take-off eventually occurred. Subsequently, the country experienced over a decade of outstanding growth. Regrettably, this growth did not prove sustainable in the long term, and Ireland is now

1 See, for example, Aikins; Aikins, Sands & White; Brinkerhoff; de Haas; Kuznetsov, ed., *Diaspora Networks*; Kuznetsov, "Why Is Diaspora."

2 The following sigla will be used throughout and with reference to the list of works cited: DD (Dáil Debates), DFAT (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), DAFF (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food), DF (Department of Finance).

in the throes of an acute economic crisis. Identical ills call for identical remedies, hence the decision to turn anew to the Irish diaspora elites for help (Brian Cowen in DFAT, “2009 Report” 48). In September 2009, the Irish authorities organised the (first) Global Irish Economic Forum to which a large number of Irish diaspora elites were invited. This clearly signalled the Irish government’s intention to tap deeper into the potential of the Irish diaspora, thus taking the involvement of the latter in economic development one step further. The invitation met a positive response, and over a hundred Irish diaspora overachievers attended the Forum.³

There exist some similarities between the “assignment” that was given to the Ireland-America Economic Advisory Board (DD 13 Oct 1992, col. 873) and the one the participants to the Forum were entrusted with. Both groups were asked to act as a think-tank whose mission would be to give advice and new ideas on particular policy questions. In the early 1990s, revamping the country’s image abroad or “branding” Ireland was part of the Board’s initial task (DD 12 Oct 2005, col. 795). More recently, the participants to the Forum were asked “to develop and renovate that brand to give us [Ireland] a competitive advantage in a globalised world” (Brian Cowen in DFAT, “2009 Report” 49) and to suggest ways to restore the country’s reputation worldwide (17-20), a challenging task given the various scandals in which some Irish banks have been involved. The participants to the Global Irish Economic Forum were also assigned to reflect upon the repositioning of the Irish economy for the upturn.

Despite the similarity of the assignment given to the Ireland America Economic Advisory Board and to the Global Irish Economic Forum, there is a fundamental difference between the two groups. The Ireland America Economic Advisory Board has remained a very inconspicuous network, operating as a sort of *éminence grise* behind the scenes. Even if the regular updates of its activities, presented to the Dáil, provide us with an insight into some of the main recommendations that have been put forward over the years, the list of its members has never been made public, and its reports are classified. In contrast, the Global Irish Forum was a highly publicised event. Even if most of the sessions took place behind closed doors and the Chatham House Rule applied,⁴ some comments made during the sessions were leaked to the press. A comprehensive report featuring the recommendations put forward by the participants was published soon after the event (DFAT, “2009 “Report”). Shortly after the Forum, in February 2010, the Global Irish Network was launched officially. It operates on a much larger scale, both numerically and geographically, than the Ireland-America

3 Aikins, Sands & White point out the distinction “between the ‘Alumni models’ that involve mass mobilisation and the ‘overachievers model’ that focus on elite actors and target those who can influence corporate investment and decision-making processes” (46).

4 “When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed. This rule was invoked to encourage openness and the sharing of information” (Chatham House).

Economic Advisory Board.⁵ It is now composed of 350 diaspora members, including most of the Forum's participants, from 40 countries (DFAT, "Global Irish Network"). A move towards greater transparency and the use of publicity were probably the price to pay to enroll new members, especially those based in emerging countries where Irish diaspora business networks are scarce.

The Input by Irish Diaspora Elites

As already mentioned, the contribution of the diaspora elites to the economic development of the homeland is usually considered both desirable and beneficial. In Ireland, in the 1990s the Ireland-America Economic Advisory Board did assist the Irish government in its efforts to create a truly pro-business environment. The recommendations this board made were not groundbreaking but they were in line with the Irish authorities' liberal agenda and sought to drive Ireland to adopt the American style of running an economy. The Board, for example, supported the Irish government's move towards the liberalisation of certain economic sectors such as telecommunications and encouraged the authorities to set up public-private partnerships to carry out some infrastructure projects (DD 17 Nov 1998, cols. 1204-6). Whether this has been beneficial to the Irish economy is open to debate as this liberal agenda is not without its critics in Ireland. The privatisation of public service utilities has been criticised by Kieran Allen, who contends that it does not systematically bring lower prices, better services, and more efficiency (45-50). In the case of Telecom Éireann, the outcome of its privatisation was less than satisfactory (Quinn). And Eoin Reeves, who carried out an analysis of public-private partnerships in the context of Ireland's National Roads Program, is fairly sceptical about their positive effects.⁶

This board has also been instrumental in promoting Ireland's assets,⁷ presenting it as an attractive investment location in the right business circles, and has provided personalised access to key contacts in the US. It is worth noting that a number of this

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- 5 Fewer Irish people emigrated during the Celtic Tiger era, but the majority of those who did emigrate chose to go to Europe or the rest of the world. Consequently, the Irish diaspora is now geographically more widespread than it used to be, hence the outreach of this new network. Furthermore, the Irish authorities are now fully aware that relying on investment by American companies will not suffice in the years to come, as the world's economic centre of gravity is shifting eastward.
 - 6 Investment in infrastructure under PPP is supposed to be more time and cost-efficient than under traditional procurement. However, Eoin Reeves shows that the length of the procurement process and problems with the statutory approval process have caused delays in the PPP programme implementation. He also casts doubt on the potential of the PPP model to achieve value for money (Reeves 204; see also Allen 48-50).
 - 7 Among these assets were: a strong educated English-speaking workforce, low labour costs, European membership, a government intent on attracting foreign direct investment.

board's members⁸ invested in Ireland and were, thus, in a position to argue convincingly that Ireland was a very profitable location and that the Irish authorities were genuinely committed to facilitating business development as a priority. To that extent, the Ireland America Economic Advisory Board has strengthened Ireland's competitive edge and various Taoisigh have paid tribute to its contribution (DD 4 Apr 1995, col. 907; 28 Feb 2001, col. 961; 19 Nov 2002, cols. 837-43; 10 Nov 2004, cols. 312-8; 12 Oct 2005, cols. 995-7). It is worth noting that, given their expertise in product development and distribution, it was originally hoped that the group would also contribute to finding new outlets for products by Irish companies in America.⁹ In fact, there is no evidence that this board was particularly active in this regard. Interestingly, the gist of the message delivered by the Irish diaspora elites during the Forum was that Ireland had to be more self-reliant. The majority of the participants approved of the government's ongoing efforts to build Ireland's "knowledge economy" (DFAT, "2009 Report" 8), but they also dwelt on the importance of using and building up the country's existing strengths in some economic sectors as well as exploiting its assets to evolve towards this "smart economy."

In addition, in the participants' view, Ireland should differentiate itself and build a unique new "Brand." To this end, Ireland should capitalise on its "green image" not only to "rebrand" the country but also to find new openings worldwide for indigenous firms ("2009 Report" 27). The food and drink industry, which is the main indigenous industry, is a case in point.¹⁰ In 2009, by the Irish government's own admission (DFAT, "2009 Annex IV" 31), the Irish agri-food sector was facing unprecedented challenges,¹¹ but the participants insisted that it had potential for growth (32), especially in the Middle East and Asia. In their opinion, Ireland's green image was a clear advantage, but product traceability and sustainability had to be emphasised when advertising Irish food to clearly differentiate them on international markets. It was suggested that an international network of diaspora key players in the food and drink industry help promote Ireland as a "food nation" worldwide. Innovation, especially process innovation, must be applied to this industry in order to increase efficiency and margins. Some of the participants also proposed that research should focus, for

8 For example, Don Brennan, then Managing Director of the US merchant bank Morgan Stanley, became involved in the Waterford Wedgwood Group in 1990 and was, at one time, chairman of the company. Others have also invested in very profitable businesses. George Moore has invested in various sectors, in Ireland and Northern Ireland, from giftware (Belleek Pottery, Galway Chrystal) to ICT (see Murphy).

9 This Board was asked to explore "movements towards a more balanced pattern of economic relations than that which concentrates on attracting US multinational companies with the lure of low taxation and high profits." (Albert Reynolds; qtd. in O'Clery, "Reynolds" 2).

10 This sector accounted for 38.5% of the sales in Irish-owned industry in 2009 and 46% of all exports of Irish-owned firms (Forfás 9-10).

11 This sector experienced a 15% decline in export sales in 2009. This decrease was mainly due to the euro exchange rate with sterling (Forfás 10).

example, on pharmacological properties of food and medical benefits of biopharma. They also suggested that Ireland become a centre of excellence for the development of nutritional products.

In the Forum's view, another asset that should be exploited as a priority is the country's cultural legacy. Ireland's green image and its cultural heritage should be actively advertised to promote eco-tourism and cultural tourism, which were identified as potential growth sectors. Furthermore, Ireland's cultural and artistic strengths should be used to restore Ireland's image abroad, which, it is believed, would eventually benefit the business sector (DFAT, "One Year On" 7). During the Forum, it was highlighted that the cultural and creative sector is one of the most dynamic areas of the Irish economy both in terms of employment and output,¹² and financier Dermot Desmond envisaged the creation of a world-class university of the performing arts, which could not only become a centre of excellence for artistic and creative education, but also promote the convergence of innovation, technology, and the Arts. Overall, the participants in the Forum attempted to broaden the Irish authorities' conception of innovation, which they believed to be too narrowly focused on research and development of certain sectors such as information and communication technologies or life sciences (DFAT, "2009 Report" 27).

The report on the follow-up to the Global Irish Economic Forum (DFAT, "One Year On") as well as the National Recovery Plan 2011-2014 (DF, *National Recovery*) show that some recommendations made during the Forum have been taken into account. The need to maintain state expenditure in innovation was clearly stated (DF, *National Recovery* 61). In addition, tourism and the agri-food sector were acknowledged as potential growth sectors (DF, *National Recovery* 31). A very comprehensive study (DAFF, *Food Harvest 2020*) was carried out with a view to exploiting the "green image" of Irish agriculture for export purposes. Overall, budget cuts were not as drastic as those advocated in the McCarthy report,¹³ which clearly ran counter to the recommendations put forward by the Forum.

12 According to a study carried out by DKM Consultants on the economic impact of the cultural sector, in 2008, the "value added" dependent on this sector (taking economic multipliers into account) was €11.8 billion. that is, 7.6% of the total Gross National Product. It also accounted for 8.7% of total employment in the economy ("Cullen Hails Success"; Dublin Central Arts Workers).

13 The Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes, better known as the McCarthy Report, advocated drastic cuts in the expenditure of a number of departments and even questioned the very existence of the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism, as these areas were considered low-priority sectors. Basing its conclusions on the observation of the evolution of the Irish economy between 2000 and 2007, this report also queried the economic impact and returns of state investment in science, technology, and innovation on economic activity. Finally, doubling the number of PhDs was deemed useless in the absence of a clear business need (Govt. of Ireland, Dept. of Finance "Report" 1: 14, 33; 2: 13-19).

Engaging the Irish Diaspora in Ireland's Economic Development: A Double-Edged Sword

The outcome of the Irish Global Economic Forum is interesting on more than one account. The diaspora elites did not only come up with a spate of advice to prepare Ireland for the economic upturn, they also made some disparaging remarks about the ruling government. Some participants pointed to its responsibility in the crisis and implicitly called for corrective measures. According to the Forum Report, "it was noted that some elements of the crisis appeared to be home-grown due to an inadequate financial regulatory system and perceived 'self-indulgence' on some issues [...] A further negative noted was the perception in some quarters of inadequate ethical standards in public office and the banking sector" (DFAT, "2009 Report" 17).

Furthermore, the previous government's management of the economy also came under fire. Craig Barrett, retired CEO of Intel,¹⁴ was particularly vehement. According to Niall O'Dowd, his speech made quite an impression on the audience: "The day belonged to Craig Barrett [...] he made everybody sit up and pay attention" (O'Dowd; qtd. in O'Clery, "Can the Irish"). Barrett reportedly declared that out of the fourteen reasons why Intel invested in Ireland only one remained: the low corporate tax rate. In his opinion, the country's infrastructure is far from being up to standard. Ireland must also urgently improve its education system, foster creativity, and aim to increase the number of graduates in maths and sciences. Barrett also stressed the fact that Ireland was too dependent on foreign direct investment, whose era, he contended, was over. He stated that the Irish government must now concentrate on fostering local entrepreneurship, which, he believes, is the key to sustainable growth. This is probably not what the Irish government wanted to hear. For decades, the Irish authorities had consistently relied on foreign direct investment as the main growth engine of the Irish economy and at the time it was still seen as the way forward (Brian Cowen; qtd. in Joannon). In addition, even if it was not stated clearly in the Global Irish Economic Forum agenda, the Irish government counted on Irish-American elites to keep on contributing to the promotion of Ireland as an investment location. Finally, although Barrett commended the government for the steps it had taken to stimulate innovation, he stressed that they were not sufficient and that state investment in research and development should be increased substantially. Barrett's intervention emphasises¹⁵ that, although the diaspora elites expressed their willingness to help, they also stressed the importance of taking on board their criticism and of executing the ideas raised during the Forum (DFAT, "2009 Report" 27). In other words,

14 Intel has invested \$7 billion in Ireland since 1986 (O'Clery, "Can the Irish").

15 Interestingly, soon after, Craig Barrett was appointed chairman of the Irish Technology Leadership Group, a business network, located in Silicon Valley, which assists Irish entrepreneurs wishing to export to, or expand in, the United States. Ever since, he has kept on rehashing his message in the media and on various public occasions to make sure that it is getting through to the Irish government (Coyle 32; O'Sullivan 92; Siggins 16; Collins 19; Fallon 19).

the Irish diaspora elites are ready to contribute to Ireland's economic recovery but expect, in return, the Irish authorities' commitment to act.

At the time of the Forum, it was hoped that the Irish diaspora would help revamp the country's tarnished image. But, as the economic crisis worsened in the ensuing months, the previous government's management of the economy came under increasingly hostile criticism from the national and international press. As a result, some diaspora elites made it clear that they were not prepared to lend their support unconditionally. In November 2010, a meeting of the Global Irish Network gave some of its 60 North America-based members the opportunity to air their grievances to government officials (Hickey; Dara Kelly; Marlowe 11). This meeting took place shortly after the publication of two extremely critical articles on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* (Forelle & Enrich) and in *The Irish Times* (Morgan Kelly 11). Those articles questioned the solvency of the Irish economy. Some of the Network's members blamed the government for underplaying the depth of the crisis, for losing all credibility, and for its lack of transparency. The words of an unnamed Wall Street financier, who was quoted in *The Irish Times* shortly after this meeting, clearly shows that some diaspora members were not fooled by the government's upbeat attitude: "You have a huge credibility problem. We don't believe you. When you predict rosy growth rates for three years, we know you are just picking those numbers out of the sky ... So front up with us" (Marlowe). Harsh criticism was further expressed following the EU bailout (Feran). It became clear that some diaspora members were not prepared to lend their support blindly to that government.

Largely discredited in public opinion, Fianna Fáil was defeated in the general election of February 2011. The new Fine Gael-Labour coalition government has pursued the diaspora strategy initiated by its predecessor and a second Global Irish Economic Forum took place in October 2011. Again, a large number of suggestions were made (see DFAT, "Report Second Forum 2011"), which led to concrete initiatives in the economic field (see DFAT, "Diaspora Partnerships"). By all appearances, the current Irish government and the members of the Global Irish Network seem to be working together in the spirit of partnership.

However, the controversy raised by Gabriel Byrne's criticism of the Gathering 2013 demonstrated yet again that collaborating with diaspora elites can backfire when the homeland authorities are perceived as reneging on commitments made. Byrne served as Ireland's first cultural ambassador to the US in 2010 and 2011. His appointment stemmed from the first Global Irish Economic Forum. The actor played a key role in Imagine Ireland, the 2011 initiative under the aegis of Culture Ireland,¹⁶ designed to promote contemporary Irish culture in America. But eighteen months into his three-year appointment he decided to step down. In November 2012, during a radio interview, he launched a blistering attack on a government-backed initiative

16 Culture Ireland is the body established to promote Irish arts and culture abroad.

aimed at attracting an extra 325,000 tourists (the main target being the Irish diaspora). In 2013, Irish people were expected to invite friends and relatives back to Ireland to attend a festival called “The Gathering,” but which Byrne called “a scam.” He bluntly declared: “And then you talk to older people, Irish-American people here, and they say ‘we are sick to death of this, because the only time the diaspora, or the Irish-Americans, are ever mentioned is as tourists, and how we can shake them down for a few quid’” (Byrne; qtd. in Clifford). But, according to some sources (Cooper; Shortall), much of Byrne’s outrage was provoked by the government’s cultural policy, which has led to cuts to arts budgets and the curtailing of the power of Culture Ireland. During this interview, Byrne criticised in robust terms the government’s lack of concern for the arts and spoke of his disillusionment about the absence of follow-up to the hard work he put in (for free) when he was Ireland’s cultural ambassador to the US (Coleman).

As the members of the Global Irish Network have extensive business expertise, knowledge of international markets, and networks of key contacts, they have the capability to help Ireland overcome the current crisis. Thus, it is all the more important that the Irish authorities have realised that their strategy must be aimed at turning the model back to export-led growth, but also that this entails fostering indigenous entrepreneurship with a view to increasing exports. The time when Ireland relied almost entirely on exports by multinationals seems to be over. One must pay tribute to the diaspora elites, who tried to convince the Irish authorities to change the focus of their industrial policy, but also volunteered to help indigenous firms internationalise. This seems to indicate that diaspora elites, whose role in the 1990s was merely to help attract foreign direct investment, are now willing to help Ireland grow “from within.” However, the implications of appealing to these elites are far-reaching. First, some of them could exercise freedom without responsibility, feel at liberty to criticise, rightly or wrongly, the government’s management of the economy and its choices of economic priorities in the international media. Although this can serve as a wake-up call, it can also be rather embarrassing for the authorities. Second, it is not a one-way process. It entails, on the part of the government, a commitment to act, otherwise the diaspora’s goodwill will wane. To appeal to the diaspora also involves a moral contract between the government and the diaspora elites. The previous Fianna Fáil-Green Party government seems to have taken for granted, at its expense, the fact that transparency and trust are vital elements of this contract.

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