

# Where Did Ireland Go? Abortion Vote Stuns Those on Both Sides



Crowds at Dublin Castle on Saturday cheered the announcement of the final results of the referendum to repeal Ireland's abortion ban. Credit Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times

DUBLIN — Some were joyous. Others were devastated. But most of all, in the hours after Irish voters swept away a ban on abortion, many were simply astonished.

However they felt about the result of the referendum, they were witnessing, they knew, the culmination of a fundamental shift in Irish society — and one that has come about with stunning speed.

In a remarkably compact span of time, the country has gone from being a bastion of social conservatism in the West to a place that wholeheartedly embraces positions that would have been unthinkable just a generation ago.

The culture of silence and deference to religious authority that long dominated Ireland is gone. The country that has emerged is an unlikely leader of liberal

values.

“Ireland has changed 180 degrees on everything,” said Adam Tyrrell, 24, struggling to take it all in as he smoked a cigarette outside a pub and watched the street fill up with crowds of cheering yes supporters after the results were announced.

The nation of 4.8 million people has experienced some of the fastest social and economic change in the world. In a matter of 30 years, Ireland has gone from being a poor and deeply Roman Catholic country to one that is seeing high growth rates and has installed a gay man as prime minister.

Long associated with exporting cheap labor, it has accepted a sizable number of immigrants and is home to foreign tech companies like Google, Amazon and Facebook.

In 2015, in another popular vote, Ireland approved same-sex marriage by a landslide.

“Ireland has gone from criminalizing gays, having just one television channel and priests running the show, to now a liberal, European society,” said Mark Neiland, a business owner in his 60s.



Arriving for Mass on Sunday at St. Teresa's Catholic Church in central

Dublin.CreditPaulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times

When he was growing up, Mr. Neiland recalled, Irish families had to decide between cooking dinner on the stove or watching television because electricity was scarce. "Ireland was a really poor country," he said.

When Mr. Neiland graduated from high school, he said, every classmate, including him, left for the United States, Canada or Australia.

"I would never think of leaving this place for America now," he said.

While the landslide result of the abortion referendum may have surprised much of the world, many Irish were less shocked. They have seen the changes in the country building over time.

Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, who is half Indian, spoke of a "quiet revolution that has been taking place in Ireland over the last couple of decades."

Ireland's impoverished past, as well as the outsize role of the Catholic Church, had set it apart from much of the rest of Europe. Many saw the referendum as the final step in aligning the country with the rest of the continent.

The vote, said Mr. Tyrrell, "cements us as a progressive nation."

"It's going to change the optics of how people view us after these two landslide victories," he said. "I'm so proud of Ireland."

Alan Barrett, director of the Economic and Social Research Institute in Dublin, said the results of the abortion referendum indicated a "convergence with European norms."

"If you take the standard mainstream views in continental Europe, Ireland was the outlier, and it was always economically behind Europe," he said. "With the Catholic Church being moved aside, you've got the Irish accumulating their values and views the same way that the French, the Germans or the British get theirs."





British women during a bachelorette party in a commercial area of Dublin on Saturday. Credit Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times

There are many factors behind Ireland's dramatic makeover. The most dominant reason is the collapse of the Catholic Church's influence in most spheres of Irish life. "It's very important to know that Ireland has been secularizing for a long time," said Diane Negra, a professor of cultural studies at University College Dublin.

The credibility of the church has been battered by a string of scandals, some involving pedophile priests and the cover-up of their crimes.

Ireland's practice of placing thousands of unwed mothers into servitude in so-called Magdalene laundries, designed to rehabilitate what the church considered "fallen" women, did not end until the mid-1990s. And in a case that traumatized the nation, the remains of nearly 800 children born out of wedlock were found in 2014 in a Catholic-run home for mothers and their children in Tuam.

Another major factor driving the change: an economic transformation.

As recently as the 1980s, Ireland was a very different place.

With a weak economy in that decade, many young Irish left the country to look for jobs abroad, leaving behind an older, more conservative population that was loyal to the church. It was during this period that Ireland voted for restrictive rules on abortion and marriage.

In 1983, Ireland voted in favor of the Eighth Amendment in the Constitution, which effectively banned abortion — the amendment that the Irish voted to repeal on Friday. Three years later, the Irish rejected a proposed amendment to remove a ban on divorce.

Attitudes shifted notably in the 1990s with the first revelations of the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church, and the beginning of an economic boom.

From the early 1990s to the early 2000s, Ireland was proclaimed the “Celtic Tiger.” The decade of prosperity attracted multinationals, increased living standards and brought back Irish expatriates who carried with them new ideas and values.



Luke Hussey, left, Etienne Finzetto, center, and Sean O'Donnell, who are college students, celebrated the referendum results in Dublin on Saturday. Credit Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times

The economy soured for a few years, but then recovered. Last year, Ireland posted a 7.8 percent growth rate, the highest in the European Union — though many Irish say that inequality has also risen.

Ireland's decision to make secondary schools free improved education, and the introduction of contraception significantly reduced the number of children per family. That helped more women enter the paid work force.

Anthony Fannin, 70, a retired engineer, said the economic boom "gave self-confidence to the Irish that they had lacked."

"They felt equal to the rest of the world, that they could get a share of the luxuries of life," he said.

Pointing to the church sex abuse scandals, he said, Ireland's changing fortunes also meant that "instead of people bowing their heads whenever a priest passed by, they could actually stand up and say, 'Hang on, Father, what happened back then?'"

Luke Hussey, 25, who comes from a working-class family, said his family had jumped into the middle class almost overnight during the boom, buying a car and going on vacations to Spain.

"It was weird, almost perverse that we were now a middle-class family," he said.

It was during the boom years, in 1993, that Ireland decriminalized homosexuality. Two years later, the country finally voted to allow divorce.

The referendum on abortion, many Irish said, was the final crack in the foundation of the old Ireland.

The debate in the days and months before the referendum released, for some, decades of pent-up emotions and anger against the church. Mr. Barrett described it as "national therapy." The referendum also forced a national debate on subjects that were long taboo, especially around sex.

"Ireland had a culture of silence and that's broken now," Mr. Tyrrell said.

"To be Irish now means to be open," he said. "We're sick of being quiet."

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