

## **Introductory Address on the Occasion of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland's 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

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*Uachtarán na hÉireann*  
*(President of Ireland)*

(read before the Society, 21<sup>st</sup> October 2021)

May I begin by welcoming you all today to Áras an Uachtaráin and say how very happy I am to host the 175<sup>th</sup> session of the Statistical and Social Inquiry of Ireland. May I thank Danny McCoy, President of the Statistical and Social Inquiry of Ireland, for the invitation to host today's important event and for the invitation to respond to his paper, his SSISI Presidential Address to which I look forward to hearing.

As an all-island learned society which analyses the major demographic, economic, labour and socio-economic changes that have taken place across legal and administrative systems and social services in Ireland, the Society has been well-placed and well-respected as a forum for evidence-based intellectual work and discussion since its establishment.

The Society was founded in Dublin in 1847 by a group of Irish academics, clergymen and politicians, with its first president being philosopher and economist Richard Whately. Although initially its members were predominately Unionists of the Anglo-Irish class, who were, generally speaking, more sympathetic to the British administration in Ireland than with the Irish Home Rule movement, from 1924 onwards, however, several Irish nationalists served as presidents of the Society.

It was during this period of the twenties that the Society began to enrol a substantial number of senior officials from the new Irish civil service, and it thus formed a close relationship with the Irish state. It subsequently went on to provide an important platform for those who were concerned about major social problems of the day, such as the care of orphans and neglected children. For example, the key figures associated with the founding of the Irish National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1889 were prominent members of the Society.

As sociologist Mary Daly has noted, "during these early years, the reforming agenda of the Society was extensive: changes in land law, reforming the poor law, more humane treatment for needy children, and promoting temperance". In many respects, the Society can be seen as an Irish variant of the many moral and social reform movements that were so typical of mid-Victorian England.

The Journal of the Society has provided one of the few opportunities to penetrate the official anonymity of the Irish public service. Many senior civil servants have spoken more freely on crucial aspects of government policy at Society meetings than in many other public fora. The papers presented to the Society are generally concerned with practical problems, such as crime, poverty and economic welfare or progress, and are linked by a common concern for conditions in Ireland; thus, the papers are often reports of the applied research that they are sourcing to inform policy and better policymaking.

Perhaps some of the most notable and significant papers from an Irish civil servant were those given by T.K. Whitaker during the late 1940s and the 1950s. Through these contributions, it is possible to trace the evolution of the key ideas that evolved in the 1958 publication, *Economic Development*, which would become known as the Whitaker Report.

The Society's history thus spans the closing years of the famine, the transformation of post-famine society, the years when the land question was resolved, at least partially, and its history goes on to cover the entire history of the independent Irish state. Through the Journal of the Society, we can chart how major issues such as emigration, poverty and the management of the economy have been evaluated by successive generations of members, and a

critique has been offered as to what is perceived as the relative success, or otherwise, of various Governments' policies in tackling a range of issues. Perhaps there is no other single source in Ireland that provides such a comprehensive picture of social change over such a long period.

The Society's several public meetings, meetings that are held each year, at which papers are read, allows for engaged discussion, due, in particular, to the open forum that proceeds each paper. The proceedings that are published subsequently in the Journal of the Society allows for more widespread dissemination of papers as well as the ensuing discussions.

Thus, the Society provides a unique meeting ground for discussion between decision-makers in the public service, trade union, business academic and research communities.

There were some contentious moments in the Society's history, too. There were undoubtedly limits to the aforementioned freedom of speech which civil servants could enjoy. Mary Daly refers in her history of the Society to an incident in 1932 during which Joseph Brennan, chairman of the Currency Commission, withdrew a proposed paper following the return of a Fianna Fáil government.

From the 1960s most of the papers presented by civil servants have tended to concentrate on technical statistical matters, perhaps sometimes they deserved the criticism of being overly and unnecessarily esoteric, though it should be noted, too, that often the comments made in the course of discussions following such papers were to prove enlightening as to the assumptions guiding the broad direction of government policy.

The growing technical complexity of the papers read to the Society, their use of elaborate econometric and statistical methods, perhaps reflects the changed orientations of the economics profession within Ireland, and the increased emphasis on econometrics and quantitative methodologies that has been favoured in economic and social inquiry in both academia and policymaking, and not, may I suggest, without a significant and enduring intellectual cost.

The question it fundamentally provokes is as to what is theory, methodology, analytical tool amongst many questions, I may leave to another day.

Membership of the Society has perhaps narrowed, becoming ever more focused on statistically-minded economists and sociologists from the quantitative rather than the qualitative side of the discipline, many of whom are employed within the public service, private business and academia. Such narrowing is to be regretted. It was not always so. Legal professionals were prominent until the 1920s, and numerous papers focused on legal reform; however, such topics have since become less frequently visited by the Society.

The choice of topic by the distinguished outgoing President of the Society, Danny McCoy, is all the more welcome for those reasons. Until the 1940s, the Society provided an important forum for investigating public health matters, too; today, such research is more likely to be presented in a specialist or epidemiological journal. While there are benefits from this growing professionalisation, the loss of an interdisciplinary audience is to be regretted.

May I suggest respectfully that the major challenge for the Society is to find a mechanism for maintaining and strengthening this important dimension of inter-disciplinarity. I believe that such an outcome would facilitate a rich connection between the social sciences, humanities and culture, facilitate learnings from the interstices between disciplines where, as Edward Said put it, the most exciting ideas emerge, representing a paradigm shift away from the strict, sometimes arbitrary, divisions that have on occasion impeded academics to realise their best work, and which have perhaps fuelled the decline in interest in the public intellectual and their ideas.

Danny McCoy's choice of venue as well as topic is a most welcome indicator for his support of an uninhibited discussion as to the models for our shared future.

May I conclude by again welcoming all of you to Áras an Uachtaráin again this evening on what is an important celebration – a celebration of the Society's 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but equally a celebration of the role of ideas in the public space, of evidence, of research, of the social sciences and their potentially transformative and emancipatory role in our lives.

I look forward with great anticipation to Danny McCoy's Presidential Address and this evening's proceedings of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland. Beir beannacht.