THE SUSTAINABLE NATION

Politics, Economy and Justice

Edited by Liam Leonard

THE SUSTAINABLE NATION:
POLITICS, ECONOMY AND JUSTICE

ADVANCES IN SUSTAINABILITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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THE SUSTAINABLE NATION: POLITICS, ECONOMY AND JUSTICE

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CONTENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE IRISH STATE, FROM BOOM TO BAILOUT TO BREXIT

This volume of the *Advances in Sustainability and Environmental Justice* examines events which occurred in the Republic of Ireland in the early decades of the Millennium. These years have proved to be tumultuous for Ireland, with major events such as the Peace Process, the economic boom and subsequent collapse of the Irish economy, the bailout plan of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). More recently, the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union has their Irish neighbours with an island divided North and South by an EU border. Plans in June 2017 for a coalition between the Conservatives and the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland, which goes against the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement, add to a disruptive air of uncertainty in the Republic. The main focus of this book is the response to policy processes which have occurred within the context of these dramatic changes.

Essentially, the book can be divided into three main sections, Politics, Economy and Justice. The book will provide an examination and analysis of the infrastructural development and social justice strategies and subsequent community responses in the Republic of Ireland, over recent decades. We can understand the subtext of development policies in Ireland in the context of the nation's transition from a rights-based service policy model into a rationalised entity which reflects the prevailing outlook of neo-liberal governments globally. The impact of this neo-liberal/neo-corporatist policy framework has been outlined by Phelan and Norris (2008), where they write of the linkages between the prevailing policy model and the impact on poorer communities in Dublin. The community responses which emerge in reaction to the exclusion and concern caused by a corrosive form of 'social partnership' can also be understood in this light, as environmental disputes about energy policies and communities, transport policy and heritage, waste management policy and pollution, and

development and water supplies reflect an ongoing concern with the impact of reckless development on communities, environments and the political process.

After decades of economic stagnation, the Irish state embraced the dualistic agendas of neo-liberalism and neo-corporatism to create the economic basis for the multinational-led development that came to be synonymous with the boom decade of the 'Celtic Tiger'. In addition, the state prioritised unfettered (or unregulated) infrastructural development as a response to the social needs of communities traditionally marginalised by high levels of unemployment and emigration. We can understand the consequences of this shift from the provision of a service-based social policy platform into that of a policy framework which promotes industrial concerns in the context of the Irish state's prevailing neo-liberal model, which has resulted in a social partnership model where the industrial lobby holds sway, dominating successive populist governments with the support of compliant trade unions.

One result of this has seen areas traditionally marginalised due to the deprivation of poverty, unemployment and emigration, embarking on collective action responses in defence of communities or environments (Leonard, 2008). In many ways, it has been the manner in which rural communities have been neglected by the state over the decades before the Celtic Tiger which has created the pool of discontent from which campaigns of opposition to state policy have emerged. The resultant tension between environmental and developmental considerations has created a conflict where 'the state should mediate to promote the common good' (Allen, 2007, p. xvii). However, in the Irish case, the demands of industry have gained prevalence over those of local communities excluded from neo-corporatist arrangements, with a series of community-based environmental protests occurring as a result in recent years.

These disputes have occurred against a backdrop of rapid economic growth, with communities now experiencing a change of lifestyle, with an increasingly flexible workforce now reliant on commuting to and from industrial centres, as housing has come to be priced out of the budgets of many in the population, including those migrants who have come to Ireland in search of employment. Even the protection of the trade unions has come to be diminished, owing to neo-corporate demands on social policy:

> In Ireland, pressure for flexibility and work intensity comes directly through social partnership agreements. Whereas in the past workers were granted pay rises in response to rising rates of inflation, today they must first show 'verifiable' improvements in productivity to get a pay rise … outside of the world of work the corporations want to hollow out what is left of social rights or the social wage. (Allen, 2007, p. 11)

Such demands have placed a strain on the traditional 'social capital' which had been the bedrock of community life in rural Ireland, as families become caught up in a cycle of overtime, commuting and crèches. At the same time, the remaining vestiges of a welfare state have been all but replaced with a regime of a privatised health industry. The mistreatment of immigrants in the workforce

has led to unions becoming concerned about a 'race to the bottom' in relation to the work and welfare practice of the neo-liberal state (Allen, 2007, pp. 36−37). Ultimately, there is increased uncertainty as to whether prosperity has come at too high of a price:

> The urgent question concerns the relationship between economic and cultural modernisation: is being happier the realisation of the good life? Does the Celtic Tiger represent an improvement in our overall quality of life, or moral bankruptcy and spiritual dereliction? (Kuhling & Keohane, 2007, p. 4)

This transition from policies aimed at providing services to those embedded in industrial practice is reflected in the Irish environmental policy agendas. These policy frameworks had originally been devised in order to prevent pollution and regulate industry, but have subsequently come to facilitate corporations and economic growth.

Having enjoyed the benefits of the economic growth associated with the Celtic Tiger boom of the last decade, communities in Ireland are beginning to witness the downside of accelerated growth. Offshoots of rapid development such as hyper-consumption, a buoyant property market and increased car ownership led to further demand for critical infrastructure such as roads, waste management sites and water treatment facilities. Such was the link between growth and infrastructure that those communities which voiced concerns about projects were deemed to be backward thinking and against progress. An understanding of these issues can be derived from an examination of the community responses to infrastructural projects that came to be perceived as threats to locals and their health and environment, or to the heritage of the nation itself.

Prior to this, political groupings had supported a number of environmental community movements which had mobilised against infrastructural projects in rural and suburban areas. The book examines some of these contentious disputes, including issues surrounding the municipal provision of water and attempts to develop a gas installation and pipeline in the west of Ireland. Such movements became characteristic in an Ireland that was experiencing accelerated growth in the early decades of this century. While many welcomed growth, some warned of an economy which was overheating and which excluded many, including the poor, women's groups and community groups concerned for their local environments (Leonard, 2008).

This increase in marginalisation is examined in the book's final chapters, as issues of justice and injustice are discussed. These chapters look at Ireland's increased multiculturalism, and the need to develop new perspectives to create an inclusive Ireland. In addition, approaches to restorative justice and imprisonment are examined, as part of attempts to create what this author has titled 'Sustainable Justice' (Leonard & Kenny, 2010).

This book represents a culmination of my research on Ireland which began at the turn of the Millennium. Whilst some of the issues here have been published in part in journals, books and articles through different formats, this

book has given me an opportunity to revisit, revise and distil my work on Ireland from the last two decades. These have indeed been tumultuous changes in Ireland over these years, from the Peace Process through to the 100th anniversary of the Easter Rising in 2016. One wonders what rebel leaders such as Padraig Pearse, James Connolly, Constance Markievicz and Michael Collins would think of the current political establishment in Ireland, which has succumbed to austerity and neo-liberal corporatism rather than embracing their communities and resources in a sustainable manner.

And as the *Advances in Sustainability and Environmental Justice* comes of age with this, its 21st volume, I have been pleased to see the series grow through the years examined in this book. I am certain that the series will continue to grow and explore relevant issues in sustainability for many years to come.

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