

The Distrust of the Political Class



by Theodore Dalrymple

Deep mistrust of political elites is now widespread throughout the Western world, probably to an extent greater than at any time in recent history. Whether this is because the elites are worse than they once were, or whether it is because, thanks to various media, we know more about them, is a question often debated around middle-class dinner tables.

Most people incline to the view that the political class is worse than it once was, more out of touch with the population and concerned with its own advantages than before, and certainly few people ever express any respect for it. Participation in elections is reluctant rather than enthusiastic, and most voters vote against rather than for a candidate. In Europe, at least, there is the feeling that when we vote, we are voting for the captain of the ship that is

unavoidably headed for the rocks.

In Ireland, the government and the political class as a whole has just comprehensively lost a referendum on a proposed change to the constitution. Only 44 percent of the population bothered to vote, which is itself a powerful commentary on its respect for its political class: for, after all, a country's constitution is not a document without a certain importance.

The Irish constitution, which dates from 1937 when the Catholic church was still the unacknowledged legislator of the state—much as Percy Bysshe Shelley once said, with less justification, that poets were the unacknowledged legislators of the world—has the following clauses:

“The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law. ...

“The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack.”

Whether constitutions should have such clauses may be open to question, but irrespective of their wisdom, the constitution does have such clauses. The [proposed amendment](#) would have inserted the words “the Family, whether founded on marriage or on other durable relationships” into the first clause and have removed the words “on which the Family is founded,” from the second.

Obviously, the term “other durable relationships” is so ambiguous that it would require continual legal scholasticism to interpret its meaning—and perhaps this was intentional, for the political class needs to give its legal wing something to do, preferably providing it with an extra source of permanent employment.

The 44 percent of the eligible voters who voted on the

amendment rejected it by a margin of 2 to 1. But every major political party in the country had campaigned strongly for a “Yes” vote; before the referendum, there were hundreds, if not thousands, of posters in Dublin calling for a “Yes” vote, but none for “No.”

It is not as if the Irish are still rock solid in favor of marriage, as they would have been in 1937, when the constitution was promulgated and illegitimacy was regarded—very cruelly—as the mark of Cain. On the contrary, in 2022, 43 percent of [births in Ireland](#) were registered as being out of wedlock or civil partnership, another category outside normal marriage, 2 percent more than in the previous year. In other words, a large proportion of children are now born out of wedlock, and if the trend continues, which of course it might not, the day will come when births within marriage are a rarity. (I couldn’t help noticing, by the way, that the lowest rate of illegitimacy, still very high by historical standards, was in the richest area.)

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the population voted the way it did not in spite of the propaganda by the political class but because of it. The referendum might well have gone the other way if only the political class had appeared neutral and said little or nothing.

In Australia, there was recently a referendum about something called the Voice, which was to be an advisory body to parliament supposedly representing the interests of Aborigines. The proposal was both vague but racist; it would have promoted a class of race activists, and would obviously also have resulted in endless disputes and bitterness over the Voice’s actual power or lack of it. The campaign in its favor was ubiquitous and well-funded, and the liberal politicians and the cultural elite were strongly in favor. Even the national airline, Qantas, adorned its aircraft with a huge painted “Yes.” Sixty percent of the population voted “No.”

I suspect that the Brexit vote in Britain would have gone the other way had the government not campaigned so strongly in

favor of remaining and putting pamphlets in every letter-box in the country at public expense—and also had not President Barack Obama advised strongly against Brexit.

So vain and puffed-up is the political class that it cannot imagine that its advice might often be counterproductive (from its own point of view), that it is so despised by the general population that many people are inclined to think that the opposite of what it says must be true, and that if it were to declare that two and two made four, many people would conclude that they must therefore make five.

The contempt in which the political class is now held in so many countries is no doubt largely justified, but that is not the end of the question. Man is a political animal, said Aristotle, and our populations are now so large that it is virtually inevitable that there will be a political class, that is to say, a class of persons who devote their entire lives to seeking office. But if the existence of such a class is inevitable, we have to find some way of making it as good as possible. Either throwing up our hands and saying, “They are all the same,” refusing thereby to participate in political life, or alternatively hoping for some kind of political savior to come over the horizon, is no solution.

That the Irish voters gave their political class a bloody nose was a good sign, but that there were so few of them who voted at all was a bad sign.

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