Who is running Ireland – the Government or the Church?

Posted: Mon, 27th Mar 2017 by Keith Porteous Wood

The reach and power of the Catholic Church has waned considerably in recent years in Ireland. But there are troubling signs that its undue influence over the country is returning, writes Keith Porteous Wood.

It is difficult to envisage now, but when the UK was formed at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Dublin was regarded as the "Second City of the British Empire". Ireland's role in British political life was no less than that of England, Scotland and Wales from then until the progressive separations from Britain that started during the First World War.

The Catholic Church that had been suppressed by the Imperial power was quick to help fill the vacuum left by the British departure. The 1937 constitution was based on Papal encyclicals and presented on two occasions to the Vatican (a foreign state) for review and comment, and unsurprisingly accorded the Roman Catholic Church a "special position", a position it certainly occupied in education at least. This formal status was repealed only in 1972, but was not of course matched by any reduction in the Church's role in education.

The Church's power came from its pervasive and anti-secular influence in the Government and Parliament, where the pious may well have been faced with conflicts of interest, and not only on sensitive matters of social policy such as divorce and abortion, but crucially on financial matters.

The vast child abuse scandal mainly concerned institutions run on the state's behalf by the Catholic Church. It was agreed that the Church and the state would take equal responsibility and each pay half.

Then it was reported in 2009 that two named nuns, inexplicably acting on behalf of the whole Church, were able in 2002 to negotiate with the Government an unbelievably small "128m euro settlement for the Catholic Church's responsibility for their abuse of children [and] an indemnity agreement from the Government against all future claims". This was based on an assumption that the costs would be far less than they turned out to be, something it is difficult to believe the Church did not know; it was in a far better position than the Government to do so.

It is difficult to understand how the nuns, clearly acting for undisclosed principals, managed to wangle this astonishing agreement, unless, as we suspect, whoever they were negotiating with was prepared to give the Church everything it wanted. The whole episode was a cynical charade masking a massive undisclosed subsidy of the Church by the State – or could it even have been a fraudulent misappropriation? As the *Irish Independent* reported: "The then-Attorney General, the legal adviser to the Government, was excluded from the negotiations, the Department of Finance advised against the deal and was not kept informed, and no memo explaining the agreement was brought to government."

"Devout Catholic" Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and the Education Minister signed off the deal on the last day of their term of office in 2002, saving this travesty from any scrutiny by Parliament, far less the judiciary – which seems even more appropriate.

The paltry €128m cap on the Church's contribution was increased to €353m after the publication of the incredibly damning Ryan report in 2009. This is still well short of the €650m, being the half of the then estimated €1.3billion total abuse liabilities, the remainder to be borne by the State. Taking into account the costs of enquiry, a survivor redress scheme and related survivor supports, the *Journal* claimed in a headline earlier this month that "Religious groups still owe €1.3 billion for institutional child abuse", which if correct, represents over €600 per Irish worker. "€1.5 billion [has] been spent by Government", it reported.

It seemed almost a different country, and everyone rubbed their eyes in disbelief, when in 2011 Ahern's successor Enda Kenny recalled the Irish ambassador to the Vatican (and later stunned the world by closing the embassy) in protest after an independent report that Irish bishops were being discouraged by the Vatican from reporting sexual abuse to the police.

He denounced in the Irish Parliament the Holy See's (the Vatican's diplomatic arm) "dysfunction, disconnection, elitism and narcissism" in its handling of the clerical sex abuse crisis to this day.

He told Parliament: "The rape and torture of children were downplayed or 'managed' [in order] to uphold instead, the primacy of the institution, its power, standing and 'reputation.' " Mr. Kenny added that the Vatican had not listened "to evidence of humiliation and betrayal" with compassion, but had instead chosen "to parse and analyze it with the gimlet eye of a canon lawyer." The Irish Parliament also passed a motion denouncing the Vatican's role in "undermining child-protection frameworks."

Mr Kenny had another welcome surprise for us this month. Speaking in Philadelphia after the publication of a report revealing the Church had paid only 13% of a €1.5 billion fund for victims of institutional abuse he said: "I would expect that the congregations and the Church would reflect on the seriousness of this, and measure up to" … "the responsibility that they accepted". He added: "I referred a number of matters to the Pope when I met with him last year and I would expect that the Vatican would respond to those."

These have all been fine words from Mr Kenny, and I have no doubt they were sincere. But, as so often with Irish affairs, the Church seems to be reasserting its power. It was announced in 2014 that the embassy would reopen, albeit with just one member of staff who would "follow the activities of the Holy See on the development and human rights front", presumably at a time when the then new Pope was rather more admired than he is now, particularly on the child abuse front – accusations of his backsliding are now the norm.

I reject these accusations, but the reality is even less edifying. The Pope has always done all he can to prevent any payment by the Church for clerical abuse and imprisonment of guilty clerics. But he is great on apologies and setting up of bodies (e.g. a commission and a tribunal) that are designed to achieve nothing. Those who had been so keen to swallow the smiling Pope's brilliant PR gestures are slowly waking up to the reality.

In 2015 the Irish Church's €353m abuse liability cap was predictably reduced without explanation to €226m, "of which it was reported in 2017 only "€85m had been received by the State".

How far we have come from the realisation of the horror and scale of the abuse, the greatest per capita in the world – as far as we know – some of which has even been regarded by the UN as torture. Even the official reports make unbearable reading. Yet, just a few years later the Irish Government is letting the Church off paying compensation and the Church shamelessly reneges at every opportunity on even the meagre commitments it has made.

In 2016 a forthcoming papal visit was announced. An enlightened correspondent wrote to the Irish Times noting that the State didn't pay for the Pope's visit to Philadelphia and complaining that: "Enda Kenny says there is no money to pay teachers and gardaí, so there can be no money to finance the proposed visit by Pope Francis in 2018. Indeed, since Irish bishops invited him, they should, as hosts, cover all the costs and expenses. I hope there is no assumption that the State will foot this bill, initiated by private individuals. Also, in advance of agreeing to this visit, the State should confirm that all redress fund issues have been resolved." We wish the correspondent luck.

These are very similar complaints to those we made when his predecessor visited the UK. We didn't win, but we did host the biggest demonstration against a Pope, ever. We hope our Irish cousins will consider protesting in full view of the Pope about these points and the Church's failure to pay its share of compensation.

And Mr Kenny's recent plea for the Pope to intervene has been met with a deafening silence. Shouldn't Mr Kenny, in the interests of the country he leads rather than those of the Vatican, follow the correspondent's suggestion and at least make the pontiff's visit conditional on a full settlement of outstanding debts?

And the most recent indication of Ireland backsliding to its shameful Church-dominated past comes with the Religious Sisters of Charity being *given* St Vincent's hospital in Dublin, that cost €200-300 million from public funds, despite the Sisters of Charity being involved heavily in abuse and being €3million short in the modest amount they agreed to contribute towards the abuse settlements. Possibly even worse are the remaining concerns that this maternity hospital will be run with a Catholic ethos which would almost certainly mean Catholic doctrine-based restrictions on contraception, sterilisation, gender reassignment and abortion.

Micheál Martin, the Fianna Fáil leader, has previously called for all hospitals owned by the Catholic Church, including St Vincent's, to be "handed over to the state".

Good for him and I hope he continues to press for this, but sadly, we are not holding our breath. It would be even better if Mr Martin also called for many more schools to be handed to the state – maybe that is one way the state could get its €1.3 billion back.

We should not forget that these dreadful examples are symptoms of a Church that will continue to exploit every weakness to increase its power and wealth – often helped by its supporters that should have other primary loyalties – and a state and body politic whose systems and controls are manifestly not capable of resisting such relentless onslaughts. These systemic weaknesses need to be recognised and eradicated. That is a much harder job and not one just for Ireland against the Catholic Church.

But turning first back to the symptoms.

As noted above, the Church still owes over €600 per Irish worker over abuse. Unjustified gifts such as St Vincent's hospital should be paid back and many more Irish schools should be handed back to the state to end the Church's near monopoly on state funded education where indoctrination is the norm.

These should be a key policy matters that should be discussed in every election until they are resolved. We call for Mr Kenny to turn his fine words into actions and for all the political parties to make manifesto commitments on all these important questions.

Anything less will be yet a further betrayal of those who have been abused and the Irish people as a whole.

Keith Porteous Wood

Keith Porteous Wood is the president (and former executive director) of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

- Share on What's App
- Share on Facebook
- Share on Twitter
- Share on Email
- Subscribe to RSS Feed

Tags: Abuse

Related Campaigns

- **End abuse in religious settings**

  Religious privilege must not undermine safeguarding and justice.

  Read More

Related Articles

Experts speak out against religious abuse

Public authorities failing to tackle abuse in religious settings, panellists say at NSS event. Read More »

Report: CofE safeguarding “below standards” of secular institutions

Most victims and survivors unsatisfied with safeguarding approaches, while safeguarding 'weaponised' to remove those "seen as a nuisance", report finds. Read More »

Faith school banning parts of geography lessons, Ofsted finds

Ofsted finds faith school prohibiting parts of lessons it judges incompatible with its religious beliefs. Read More »

NSS to hold event on tackling abuse in religious communities

Safeguarding experts in panel discussion in Manchester this March. Read More »

Review: CofE leaders mainly to blame for sacking safeguarding body

"Extreme time pressure" imposed chiefly by archbishop of Canterbury caused "serious design flaws" in safeguarding board, review finds Read More »