Fintan O’Toole: How Ireland is dis-integrating

‘The Irish Times revealed recently that 80 per cent of immigrant children are already concentrated in just 23 per cent of primary schools’



‘Official policy is now (blindly and inadvertently) driving us towards effective segregation.’ Photograph: Getty Images



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Ireland is dis-integrating. A decade ago, the challenge of integrating an unprecedented wave of migrant families loomed large on the official policy agenda. Now, we are sleepwalking into segregation. The tragedy is we’re doing this through what has been the best part of our response to immigration – the education system. Here, as in so many areas of Irish life, the decency and energy of citizens and communities is undermined by the State’s neglect.

The arrival of large numbers of Poles, Brazilians, Nigerians, Latvians and even Brits to work and live in Ireland is the most startling change to have happened in Ireland in my lifetime. It was a breach in the natural order of things – going to Ireland to get a job was like going to Saudi Arabia for the beer. In a society as white as sliced pan and as Catholic as a convent, it was social change in its most visible and audible form. A street in any town became a kaleidoscope of faces. The top of the bus became a Tower of Babel. Of course, every European society has experienced the same thing, but in Ireland it all happened with incredible alacrity. Before, a foreigner was typically just one of us with an accidental English accent. After, one in eight of us was born “outside Ireland” in a much bigger sense. It was a dramatic shift.

**Pride**

Did all of these people find a perfect welcome? Of course not – racism, fear, resentment and intolerance are no strangers to our shores. But Ireland has no serious anti-immigrant party or movement, and there’s a reason for that. The reason is not the State. Official responses were generally slow and inadequate. Migrants were often concentrated in communities that had fewest resources to cope with radical change and that were benefiting least from the globalised economy. Yet, in general, Irish society can take pride in the way it rose to the challenge. By 2011, half a million non-Irish-born people were living here by choice and many of them were making the ultimate commitment to the country – having Irish children.

This success story happened very largely in schools. Neighbours, communities, colleagues, sports clubs – all have been important. But the local school is the place where public and private, family and State interact most potently. And schools haven’t got enough credit for what they’ve done. In areas with high concentrations of migrants, many teachers were suddenly faced with half their classes being made up of kids who had little or no English. But the great Irish virtue – adaptability – kicked in. Teachers, parents and (let us not forget) children got on with things. They deployed the native graces – humour, curiosity, rough decency – and muddled through. And, let us not forget either, the immigrant families also coped, with courage and optimism and by biting their tongues and accepting the Irish way of doing things, with all its exasperating inconsistencies.

But the downside to muddling through is official complacency. A social disaster that might have happened didn’t. And therefore the State didn’t have to do what it most hates doing – thinking ahead. It had before it two huge warning signs. It could see the consequences of ghettoising migrants in post-war western Europe. And it could see the role played by segregated education in sustaining sectarianism in Northern Ireland. Yet it could look away because everything was okay, wasn’t it?

And so, since the crash, integration isn’t even a buzzword any more. Emigration started up again, so immigration slipped from view – even though, last year alone, 49,000 non-Irish people came to live here. The National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism was simply axed in 2008, as if having a policy of integration was just another mad indulgence of the boom years.

Much worse, though, is that official policy is now (blindly and inadvertently) driving us towards effective segregation. I’ve long argued here that the Government’s refusal to confront church (especially Catholic Church) control of education would have bitterly divisive consequences in an increasingly pluralistic society. I’ve also argued that the official policy of “choice” would lead, at best, to a system in which children from larger religious groups would be concentrated in their own schools and minorities would be concentrated in theirs.

**Segregation is happening**

This is now happening even faster than I feared. *The Irish Times* revealed recently that 80 per cent of immigrant children are concentrated in just 23 per cent of primary schools and that in 20 schools more than two-thirds of children are from non-Irish backgrounds. Segregation is no longer a fear for the future – it’s happening.

But it’s not irreversible. We can make our primary schools community-owned public institutions in which all children are welcomed equally and all faiths are facilitated outside of a common core school day. That requires a recognition that what’s okay for communities – muddling through, getting by – is not okay for republics. If we want to have a meaningful republic in 20 years’ time, rather than a patchwork of minorities, the Government must act on a simple principle – our children must know one another.

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