

# Diverse Republic: Why Ireland has no appetite for conspiracy-laden politics

Eoin Ó Broin: Book misses key point in why far-right politics has gained no foothold here



The last decade has seen a resurgence of authoritarian and far-right political movements across the globe. The extent of this growth has varied from country to country.

In some cases, such as Hungary, Brazil and the US, the strength of these movements has resulted in the election to office of authoritarian presidents. In others, where electoral success has been more muted, such movements still manage to impact on mainstream political discourse.

In his latest book, *Diverse Republic*, Bryan Fanning, professor of migration and social policy at UCD, examines how such movements have fared in southern Ireland in recent years.

The book focuses on the intersection between a range of discourses and strategies that have underpinned far-right movements in other countries including anti-immigrant nationalism, Islamophobia, nativism and authoritarian populism.

Fanning concludes that, while such movements have gained little traction in elections or broader public discourse, there should be no room for complacency. Migrant communities continue to experience racism and economic discrimination, asylum applicants continue to

live in an appalling direct provision system and new Irish communities continue to be virtually absent from local and state-wide politics.

The author correctly accuses the political mainstream of benign neglect when it comes to developing strategies to encourage greater participation in political life from EU and third-country nationals and their Irish-born children. However, Fanning has less to say when it comes to what politics or initiatives he would like to see political parties and Government introduce to address this neglect.

Diverse Republic reads more like a collection of essays than a single book with a central theme. Like all collections, there are stronger and weaker contributions.

The chapter on Irish Far-Right Perspectives is a useful review of the ideas of Justin Barrett of the Irish National Party and former journalists Gemma O'Doherty and John Waters. The chapter draws the thinking of all three figures, from their earlier writings to their more recent forays into electoral politics. While seeking to emulate the success of far-right groups in the US, particularly through the use of social media, Fanning demonstrates that there is little if any appetite for their increasingly conspiracy-laden views.

Fanning's chapter on Immigration and Politics is also very useful. It traces the interaction between inward migration and mainstream policy and politics since the mid-1990s. He argues that, in broad terms, mainstream political parties have welcomed inward migration, particularly as part of EU enlargement, for its economic benefits.

However, he rightly points to the 2004 Citizenship Referendum and the establishment of the system of Direct Provision as moments where Government policy has been at variance with broader migration policy. The impact of this divergence, and the unfortunate public discourse surrounding these policies, has undermined the creation of a genuinely diverse republic.

Fanning recognises some improvements, albeit piecemeal and slow, in recent years. These include a commitment to end Direct Provision and the intervention of Government to prevent the deportation of Irish born Eric Zhi Ying Xue in 2018. However, the author remains critical of the lack of any coherent integration strategy from Government or the larger opposition parties. While Fanning is without doubt correct in this, he could have usefully spent some time suggesting the kinds of policies he would like to see implemented.

While the broad thrust of Fanning's analysis is positive, Diverse Republic suffers from a number of weaknesses.

The author has a very shallow understanding of both nationalism and populism, both internationally and in how they pertain to Ireland. For more than a decade there has been a proliferation of academic and political debates on nationalism and populism. Much of this

debate has moved on from the more limited anti-nationalism discussions that dominated during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Unfortunately Fanning seems blithely unaware of this work and remains trapped in an implicitly liberal, cosmopolitan, post-nationalist frame of reference. This limits his ability to fully understand why certain countries – such as Ireland, Portugal and Greece – have been able to prevent the rise of authoritarian far-right populism, despite the deep recession and Government-imposed austerity post-2008.

This liberal myopia also limits Fanning's read of both Irish history and contemporary politics, including the role played by social liberalism in creating the conditions for the right of the far right in the US, Britain and continental Europe.

Fanning struggles to break free from a conceptual framework that limits the political and policy options from a positive cosmopolitan liberalism on the one hand and a negative authoritarian, populist nationalism on the other.

Of course, the existence of a politics that rejects both social liberalism and right-wing nationalism is key to understanding why, to date, far-right politics has gained no foothold in Ireland.

While Fanning makes a passing reference to this progressive left populism close to the book's conclusion, it is clear that he really struggles to understand what it is and why it should be seen as a positive force for change.

Diverse Republic, for all its weaknesses, makes a valuable contribution to our public debate on migration, integration, and the creation of a diverse republic.

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