

Speech by Liz O'Donnell TD at launch of Integrating India at Griffith College Dublin

30th January 2007

I am delighted to attend this event. Ireland's bilateral relationship with India is already very good with warm, long-standing political links dating back to pre-Independence days in India and formal diplomatic ties between the two Governments since 1949.

Despite the wide geographic distance that separates the two countries, and the very great differences in size and population, India and Ireland share much in terms of history, cultural influences and values.

Irish educators, mostly missionaries, are well-known and appreciated for the quality of the education they have provided to Indians of all denominations, many of whom are to be found in the top branches of government and administration. They have worked extremely hard in establishing some of the best schools, hospitals and orphanages

Over the past 20 years a strong Indian community has established itself in Ireland.

The Ireland-India Council estimates the size of the Indian community in Ireland to be between 7,000 and 9,000.

They are spread throughout the country and have contributed to Irish society with their skills in the labour market and investment in the economy. They are represented in many professions information technology, medical and health care, management, engineering, architecture and education.

They also bring a strong cultural, linguistic, culinary and lifestyle influence.

Perhaps the most exciting change to have taken place in the last ten years of economic prosperity has been the change from mass emigration and all the despair it created, to net inward migration. The most important political achievement of this generation has been the move from 20% unemployment and losing 50,000 emigrants each year, to today, when we have almost full employment, and are creating more jobs than we can fill.

But Ireland has found itself with relatively little time to consider how it can and should provide for the thousands of new people coming here, to work, live, enhance and prosper.

Changing Ireland

There are few signs that immigration will end soon. One recent report says the population of the Republic will grow by 30% to over 5.3 million by 2020, and to six million by 2050. It predicts that immigrants could account for a fifth of the population by 2020.

So while in the 1980's the challenge was in staunching the flow of emigration, and the loss of so many of our talented and educated young people.

Today the challenge is integrating new immigrants into Irish society. This is all good news! It is not a threatening situation.

There is no downside economically or socially. If there is, it will be because of a failure of policy and a failure of governance.

Clear in Our Objective

We have to get a clear idea in our own minds what it is we want to achieve as a society, with any policy. Without this starting point, actions will not yield the desired results. Do we seek assimilation: *When in Ireland, do as the Irish do* - the *like it or lump it* approach? This largely discredited approach may be enjoying something of a post-911 revival in subtle guises in some countries, but it is not for Ireland.

Our own history of migration calls for a more progressive humane approach. Making a life in a foreign land has been one of the persistent challenges facing generations of Irish since the great famine as people fled a country that was unable to provide them with the opportunity to forge a life for themselves.

That race memory should and indeed does inform our approach. Good outcomes will not happen by chance.

Immigration is a new experience, as I said, resulting from the explosive economic growth since the second half of the 1990's. But our societal- memories, as a collective, as a nation means that neither segregation nor assimilation are desirable objectives for us. And they never will be. True integration and interculturalism, which guarantees equality and parity of esteem, must be our goal.

What does this mean? I believe that a specific form of integration is the preferable option. An integration that fosters interculturalism, applies to recent and longer-term migrants, and indeed indigenous ethnic majorities, and is cognisant of the type of society in which the integration should take place.

We should encourage a process of mutual respect and adjustment. Encourage newcomers to understand and accept basic Irish values while in turn encouraging Irish people to accept and respect the cultural differences newcomers bring to Ireland.

If we are to be honest, closer to home we cannot claim that we as a society have dealt well with the travelling community and the cultural challenges in their integration. There was racism and discrimination in Ireland long before we had immigrants among us.

So, rather than expecting newcomers to abandon their cultures, the emphasis must be integrating difference in a culturally diverse society. This is a truly interculturalist approach? a policy that marks a distinct shift away from any form of *laissez faire* or ad-hoc policy approach. In this area, good outcomes will not happen by chance.

A loose aspiration of multiculturalism is a recipe for disaster. It must be rights-based and planned.

Integration of newcomers must be a two way process involving adjustments on both sides. It cannot simply be mandated by Government, Government can act as a catalyst to enable and fund a policy approach but unless we have the support of society as a whole and work

in partnership with civic society and community organisations, integration and interculturalism will remain a paper-based aspiration.

Citizenship for Inclusion

My final point relates to citizenship. Research shows that citizenship can act as a tool for inclusion or a tool for exclusion when it comes to cultural and ethnic diversity. We must make sure Irish citizenship is the former. Increasing appropriately the access to citizenship or to long-term residency can demonstrate a mature and nuanced policy-approach to diversity. Something Ireland is increasingly recognised for.

We should begin to look at both symbolic and legal entitlement of citizenship- at the duties and rights - at the reassurance of residence it can provide, the greater access to services and the right to vote in certain elections it can afford; look at all of these in a way that does justice to Ireland and our values as a progressive, modern republic.

On-going implementation of the National Action Plan Against Racism and forthcoming comprehensive Immigration Legislation.

The republican view of citizenship and nationality embraces diversity of identity and tradition.