

We must guarantee a genuine Irish welcome for our returning diaspora

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Analysis: There is justification for the view that emigrants will return when the economy improves, writes **Marc Scully**

There is a contemporary narrative, particularly popular in official circles, that seeks to minimise the impact of the current wave of emigration both on the migrants themselves and on the nation.

This narrative states that, due to modern communications, the traumatic element of emigration has been softened, and that when the economy recovers the migrants will return and enrich Ireland with the skills, experiences and contacts acquired on their travels.

While this narrative is somewhat justified both by the evidence from this survey and historical patterns, the true picture is somewhat more nuanced.

It is undoubtedly the case that the range of media available to contemporary migrants enables instantaneous communication in a way that was unavailable to previous generations of emigrants.

It is notable that use of the handwritten letter, the lifeline to home of many Irish abroad over the centuries, has dwindled away.

However, interpersonal communication is only one means of retaining links with Ireland, and it is notable that there are high levels of support (70 per cent overall) for a form of communication with the homeland currently unavailable to Irish emigrants, ie a vote in Irish elections.

Given many of the respondents were undecided when asked how they would use this vote, it is arguable the desire for a vote is as much psychological as it is political.

Political scientists such as Jean-Michel Lafleur have noted that participation in elections among diaspora populations is often as much about retaining a sense of belonging to the nation as it is about achieving political ends, and it may be that the same would be true in the Irish case.

It is unclear whether there is a strong correlation between the two, but it is a neat coincidence that roughly the same proportion of respondents support votes for emigrants as express a desire to return home to live in Ireland in the future.

This again appears to be rooted in preserving a sense of belonging, as the majority of respondents invoked friends and family as their main motivation for returning – as well as a desire to raise a family in Ireland. (It is a feature of research on Irish emigrants that the realisation that their children will not speak with an Irish accent is regularly described as a pivotal moment.)

Based on this, the perceived need to provide opportunities for emigrants to return is likely to persist as a political issue. There is a certain amount of historical justification for the assumption that emigrants will return when the economy improves, as Ireland has previously had periods of return migration in the 1960s and particularly in the 1990s.

However, this somewhat glosses over the fact that many emigrants did not or could not return during these periods, and also the difficulties in reintegration into Irish society that many returning emigrants experienced.

Well-documented problems for emigrants after coming back have included difficulties in accessing social welfare and lack of recognition of civil partnerships, although legislation for the latter has recently been introduced. Such issues have been used to argue for voting rights for emigrants.

The barriers to reintegration for returning emigrants can be psychological as well as material. My own research, as well as that of Caitríona Ní Laoire and Deirdre Conlon, has illustrated the sense for many returned emigrants of feeling like outsiders, with being viewed as “different” in workplaces emerging as a common theme.

In the case of my own research, which was carried out in England, this discomfort with “settling back” was such that the people I spoke to took the opportunity to leave Ireland again when it arose.

While this survey does not specifically address this issue, being largely skewed towards more youthful emigrants, it would be interesting to have figures on the proportion of recent emigrants who are leaving for the second time. In the meantime, it is important not to be complacent about the prospects of return, and reintegration upon return for those emigrants who wish to do so.

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