

## **Role of community is key to understanding Irish water protest confrontations**

**Niamh Hourigan**

Sat, Feb 28, 2015

Will confrontational campaigners provoke Government into increasingly repressive responses to their actions?

When Jean-Claude Trichet described the Irish people as the role model for how to deal with austerity in 2010, he could not have predicted the level of anger which would emerge as part of the anti-water charge campaign. The imprisonment and hunger strike of four water protesters last week and the suspension of a meeting of Cork City Council because of the intervention of 20 water charge campaigners this week were not supposed to be part of the Irish story of austerity.

Despite our internationally submissive image at the time of the bailout, there were already signs the austerity process would run into significant public resistance. By late 2010, there had been a succession of protests in Ireland about increases to third-level tuition fees and changes to the medical card scheme. However, the dark days of banking crash produced nothing like the social upheaval which tore Greek society apart as it also entered a bailout programme during the same period.

Those who praised Irish citizens for their acquiescence seemed to underestimate the long-term grinding impact of public service cutbacks, social welfare reform and flat regressive taxes on a society where many people were struggling with unemployment and debt. The cumulative effect has led to what sociologist Neil Smelser calls a “structural strain” in Irish society, a sense that the State is not living up to the expectations of all its citizens. Given the

cautious and conservative nature of Irish political life, this strain took some time to transform into a coherent social movement.

In 2012, when Clare Daly TD called for united protest against the household charge, it was clear that she and her colleagues on the left thought that this issue would be the one that would galvanise activism. However, while both the household charge and property tax campaign brought more coherence to Irish anti-austerity protests, it was the issue of water which became the catalyst for much wider public resistance.

The imposition of water charges was a condition of the original bailout agreement with the troika, a flat consumption tax which focused more on the individual's use of water than their capacity to pay. As many industrialised societies require their citizens to pay for water services, there was some international surprise that it was the water issue that brought Irish people on the streets.

### **Austerity and community**

Ireland has transformed dramatically since then, as industrialisation and urbanisation have utterly changed Ireland's communities. But strongly positive associations with the idea of "standing up for the community" remain. These are evident every year in the Tidy Towns competition, the Community Games and the support at local level for small GAA clubs. In 2012, *Local Heroes*, the Mace-sponsored RTÉ series, was based on the premise that "while it seems that much of our economic situation is beyond our control, every individual, business and community in Ireland has the power to make a difference to the wider economy".

This community-oriented response to the economic crash may have avoided the bigger issues about responsibility for the banking crisis but, even then, it was clear not all communities

were going to bypass these questions. The Ballyhea Says No campaign in north Cork provided one of the first inklings that it might be community rather than national movements which would ultimately provide the most sustained and robust resistance to austerity.

The water-metering process which brought a wave of installers into local communities in 2014 did indeed galvanise a new cohort of activists and swelled the anti-water charge campaign significantly. By late 2014, this group had forced the Government into a significant climbdown on the water charges issue.

Since this retreat, the bigger question raised by the campaign is not whether the Government will back down on water charges entirely but, rather, whether the smaller group of confrontational campaigners who remain will succeed in continuing to provoke the Government into increasingly repressive responses to their actions. By doing so, they are creating a focal point for a broader dissatisfaction with the State's current approach to handling austerity and recovery.