

# Review of Ireland's Foreign Policy and External Relations

## Submission

Proposal for an Irish Emigrant Register

January 2014

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Between April 2008 to April 2013 the CSO have estimated that 187,500 Irish people left the State. Every year since 2009 there has been a rise in the number of Irish people leaving compared to the previous year. If the full visa allocation is taken up 2014 will see the highest number of Irish people emigrate to Canada since the 1800s.

## Introduction

Crosscare Migrant Project is an NGO that provides an information and advocacy service to intending Irish emigrants and returning Irish emigrants. We are part funded by the Irish Abroad Unit of the Department of Foreign Affairs. The roots of Crosscare Migrant Project date back to the 1940's when the then Catholic Social Welfare Bureau advised and supported Irish emigrants to British industrial cities. The service has evolved considerably since then to best serve the changing patterns, profiles and needs of our emigrants while at the same time focussing on those in the most vulnerable of situations. For example much of our work now is done via web based information documents and e-mail but we maintain our face to face drop in service for those most in need.

## The problem

Emigration has been with us for hundreds of years and at least for the foreseeable future it is likely to remain an aspect of Irish life. In recent years emigration has been particularly problematic as people have been forced to leave to find employment. Emigration is problematic in many respects but one of its key challenges that has changed little over the centuries is its legacy of disconnection. Emigration creates disconnected lives, families and communities. And yet we are led to believe that as a society and globally we are more interconnected than ever before.

As a pre-departure information service for emigrants we have seen that the recent wave of emigration has been substantially different to previous times. It has been the first wave of Irish emigration in the internet age. This has transformed the emigration experience significantly. It has allowed for a far higher degree of pre-departure preparation. For example it is now possible to search for, view and finalise accommodation online before departure. Successful job interviews are often held via web based video link for jobs on the other side of the world. Communication options with home have improved dramatically with e-mail, social networking, photo sharing and live video linking via Skype for example, all available at extremely low cost. The recent UCC Emigre report 'Irish Emigration in an Age of Austerity' found that 75% of emigrants use Skype regularly to maintain contact with family and friends in Ireland, with 90% using Facebook and other social network sites.

Yet the internet has not been maximised in terms of its capacity to minimise the damage, loss and disconnection caused by emigration particularly from the point of view of what the State can do.

Irish emigrants abroad continue to feel forgotten by the Irish State. In particular those who leave primarily for employment purposes feel failed by the State and once they have left the State it will have little if any interaction with them, unless they return home.

While Irish emigrants are keen followers of Irish current affairs and politics they also feel disregarded by the Irish State. The following are some relevant excerpts from the Emigre report:

*Irish emigrants closely follow Irish current affairs and politics. Over 70% of emigrants frequently read Irish newspapers online, while another 16.4% read Irish papers sometimes. Many mentioned following the news on RTE's website or the RTE App. Many emigrants also listen to Irish radio stations regularly (32.8%).*

*Many emigrants also complained about a perceived disregard for the Irish abroad from the State once they had left. 48% of emigrants disagreed with the statement that the government provided adequate support for Irish emigrants. Only 11.8% of emigrants agreed, with the remaining 39.3% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Two emigrants interviewed gave voice to those who felt aggrieved at the lack of state interest in the rights and needs of the Irish abroad:*

*When you start to say on an institutional level you can leave, almost in a sense 'You should leave, don't be waiting around and drawing down the dole, don't be drawing out money', it's kind of basically saying, 'You're a weight on the State', in a sense. I kind of feel like, that message says, 'You're not worth it' and I don't think that that is particularly useful. (Female, 30, Media, UK)*

*If I came back tomorrow, I wouldn't be able to go on the dole as far as I know. I had been working since I was 14 or 15. ... I paid my PRSI and paid my PAYE and when I left the country I saved them dole money and it's basically 'See ya later, don't want to know ya an if you come back, you're not getting anything'. (Male, 25-29, Structural Engineer, Melbourne)*

As the first significant wave of Irish emigration in the internet age, the capacity of emigrants abroad to remain socially connected to friends and family in Ireland and Irish current affairs and news has been better than ever before. However the State needs to move with the times and devise ways to use the internet to uphold its responsibility to its citizens who have been forced to leave.

## Proposed solution

The creation of an e-mail based Emigrant Register managed by the Department of Foreign Affairs with inputs from the Department of Jobs and Intreo in the Department of Social Protection.

The primary purpose of the register would be to facilitate connection between Irish emigrants abroad and the developing labour market in Ireland. However it could also be used for other purposes such as informing citizens about relevant embassy and consular services available and passport and travel advice issues. In essence it would act as a connecting mechanism between the Irish State and its citizens abroad.

In terms of its labour market function the State could for example contact emigrants directly about job vacancies and emerging skills needs in the Irish labour market. The Department of Social Protection have sent welfare recipients in Ireland notifications of job adverts for countries as far away as Canada. The Irish State should also be notifying Irish emigrants abroad of jobs in Ireland. The Department of Jobs and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs could also develop regular reports for Irish abroad on current and emerging skills needs. If the State was more connected to all its citizens then our responses to current and future skills needs in the labour market would be swifter.

The register could be a way of getting people home. Particularly in the context of austerity measures people are feeling there is an implied invite to leave the country by the State. Whatever amount of truth there may be in this, many would agree that there should be an explicit invite to return. Availability of jobs was one of the most common factors that would influence the chances of an emigrant returning home, according to the Emigree report. The establishment of the Irish Emigrant Register would be a very clear way of saying that 'we want you back'.

At a different level the register would be a way of bringing to life and giving a practical application to Article 2 of the Constitution which states that:

*It is the entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish Nation. That is also the entitlement of all persons otherwise qualified in accordance with law to be citizens of Ireland. Furthermore, the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage.*

## Potential challenges

While in some respects the creation of an Irish Emigrant Register is a relatively straightforward project to action there are some identifiable challenges.

- Populating the register. Getting people to register will be the biggest challenge. Crosscare suggests a number of ways to overcome this initial barrier:
  - The Department of Foreign Affairs could negotiate with the Australian and Canadian immigration services (with whom we have reciprocal visa agreements) to restructure their working holiday visa application forms to include an option to be included in the Irish Emigrant Register. Based on recent years these measures alone could potentially lead to 20,000 people being registered every year. People would also have the option of signing up to the register voluntarily
  - Keeping requested data minimal. Name, e-mail address and country of emigration could be the only required information with further options to detail the types of job notifications that would be of most interest
  - Showing that it works. It would need to be shown after a period of time that people were getting job offers and employment via the register notifications. It would be relatively simple to update people of such statistics and successes
  - Irish emigrant NGOs abroad, businesses, embassies and consulates should be asked to promote, facilitate and assist in registration. A significant promotion exercise would need to be conducted
- Keeping it updated. Like any database or register there will need to be resources dedicated to maintenance.
- Data Protection issues would need to be considered carefully. The usage parameters of the register should be very clearly defined and communicated

## Conclusion

The Irish Emigrant Register will not transform emigration into something easy nor will it make forced emigration more acceptable. What it does have the capacity to do is to make the Irish labour market more connected to Irish emigrants abroad. It can also serve as a link between the State and its citizens abroad, many of whom feel poorly supported and forgotten.

Ultimately it can help to improve our relationship with our diaspora not in an ethereal way but in a very practical and tangible sense. This in itself will transform the emigrant-State relationship for some people. The proposal will need a modest amount of funding compared to its potential gains and it will need political will from a variety of sources to make it happen. Let us not think of our recent and current emigrants as a lost generation rather a generation awaiting the call home from the Irish State. In a globalised world let us take the lead in showing other global nations how to stay connected and prove how much our diaspora means to us by establishing the Irish Emigrant Register.

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