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Opinion & Analysis



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Ideas that can change the world

Last week, the Task Force on Active Citizenship produced a fine report, reminding us that democracy demands a culture of engagement, in which people really believe that they can change the world. It drew attention to the vibrancy and vitality of voluntary, community and campaigning organisations in Irish life and to the pervasive feeling that this vitality is under threat.

Our time-poor society, the impact of commuting on notions of community, the decline of political participation, the increasing complexity of cultural and ethnic identities all create obvious challenges to the basic notion of active citizenship. We have, in fact, a rather paradoxical situation: membership of voluntary groups is, if anything, growing but there is also a sense that it is increasingly disconnected from both political and economic structures. There is clearly a need for a new set of connections, and perhaps for a new way of thinking about what citizenship means.

Last Friday, I spent some time with a man who has probably done more radical thinking about all of this than anyone else. Bill Drayton's CV makes him sound like a typical member of the top layer of the American business and administrative elite: professorships at both Stanford Law School and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, high-flyer with the consulting firm McKinsey, helping to run the Environmental Protection Agency in the Carter administration. But his dowdy suit and the holes in his jumper suggest a man with priorities somewhat different from the self-aggrandisement that tends to come with this kind of stellar career.

In 1980, Drayton founded a global organisation called Ashoka: Innovators for the Public that now operates in 60 countries, including, most recently, Ireland. Its basic idea is summed up in the term he coined: "social entrepreneurs". It sounds like a paradox: "social" belongs in the lexicon of the left, "entrepreneur" in that of the right. Drayton put them together, not as some kind of cheap slogan, but to express a big idea. It is not just that he hates the usual terms applied to groups of active citizens – non-governmental, non-profit – because they define themselves by what they are not. It is also that he wants to subvert a deeply-rooted division.

Drayton starts with an acceptance of a fact that remains rather uncomfortable for the traditional left: that business discovered forms of organisation that work. "What happened around 1700," he told me "was that we had an absolutely radical change in the structure of a part of society. Businesses became entrepreneurial and competitive. Anyone who had a better idea and could implement it got rich and they got lots of prestige. That's the most profound change in human organisation since the agricultural revolution. But it didn't happen in the social half of human organisation, and it didn't happen in the state. By the late 19th

'Anyone who had a better idea and could implement it got rich'

century you were getting individuals – Florence Nightingale in the invention of the nursing profession, Maria Montessori in education – in the social field who were acting in this way, but they were individuals. The structure didn't change." Drayton's idea boils down, I suppose, to the belief that, in

everything expect the motive of private profit, groups of citizens can act in the same way that start-up businesses do. Community leaders can be as creative, as intuitive, as obsessive and as risk-taking as business entrepreneurs are. They can use concepts like competition and productivity to measure what they do. And conversely, entrepreneurs can be at least as highly motivated by social and ethical values as they are by private profit. Drayton backed this hunch and has built a huge and growing global network of social entrepreneurs who are backed with seed capital, professional skills and contacts. In turn, they are expected to act as catalysts for real and fundamental change.

This is not abstract aspiration. Muhammad Yunus's idea of micro-credit started in Bangladesh and is now being applied around the world. It is essentially a business idea, a new way of banking, and it has become a kind of international brand. The only difference is that it is not designed to make its founders rich. In Latin America, Drayton's network set out to solve a huge social and environmental problem: the fact that small farmers were too poor to use the most sustainable drip-irrigation systems to water their crops. They brought farmer groups together, approached the leading piping company in the region, and offered it a whole new market for its products. The business has boomed, creating profits for the manufacturers, allowing farmers to double or treble their income, and giving the voluntary groups a big share of the profits to reinvest in new social projects.

Ireland has had social entrepreneurs, of course, before the term was invented, coming from the clergy, the co-operative movement and many other sources. But we need to recover that spirit and to reinvent it for the globalised context in which we now exist. The good thing is that we don't have to wait for the Government to do that for us.