

Yes Equality?

The limitations of the marriage equality referendum victory

Workers Solidarity Movement

April 2016

We don't understand words as simply words on their own, entirely dependent on their definition, as one word can have many different meanings. Context plays a big part in our understanding of words. There are some words that leave context with the responsibility of our understanding of what has just been said. The word "buckle", for example, can either mean "to connect" or "to collapse", two meanings opposite to each other, leaving us in need of context in order to understand the usage of the word.

The mainstream voices in our society would lead you to believe that last May we voted for equality. Going by the definition of "equality" alone, without any context, one would believe that we voted in favour of everyone being equal, no one worth more or deserving of less than anyone else, all of us with the same status in society.

In reality, this did not happen, not by a long shot. After the votes were counted and the Yes side won, equality did not sweep across Ireland. Class society was not abolished, the 8th amendment was not repealed, white supremacy was not eradicated, and those on the lowest rung of society were not suddenly placed on an even keel with the privileged minority.

When we add the context we see that this vote for "equality" was in regards to marriage. The right of a man and a woman to enter into the tradition of marriage was extended to LGB+ couples. That is what equality meant in this context.

It did not take long for the façade of "equality" to crumble away. The slogan of "Yes Equality" was replaced with "We Need To Look After Our Own First" when the refugee crisis was intensely brought to our attention in September last year through the tragic image of 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi's dead body on a Turkish shore.

The Irish have a long history of fleeing destitution on this island in search of a better life elsewhere. We have songs, poetry, and folklore to remind us that hardship once drove us from our homes to foreign lands – that is if we survived the journey unlike the many who fell victim to the coffin ships. Yet, in spite of this we treat those who come to us in need of the very thing that our ancestors searched for with contempt and disdain.

Those who somehow make it to Ireland are placed into the system of Direct Provision. Within Direct Provision adults are given an allowance of €19.10 a week with an added €9.60 for every child they have. This meagre allowance is all they have to buy food, clothes, cleaning products,

and everything else that human beings needs in order to survive, and they are denied this without the right to work.

To top off our world famous Irish hospitality, refugees must live in cramped, overcrowded accommodation with no control over where this will be and without the right to rent somewhere else. Some have been kept in this system and in these conditions for up to ten years. While Ireland committed to placing 4,000 Syrian refugees into this system a number of months ago we have thus far taken in 10.

For queer asylum seekers who have been locked out of Irish society at every turn – alongside their straight counterparts – “Yes Equality” was not for them, and it did nothing to help them in their circumstances, (not that our racist laws permitted them to cast a vote anyway).

Last October, “We Need To Look After Our Own First” was edited to “We Need To Look After Our Own – Except Travellers” when a fire broke out at a holding site for Travellers in Carrickmines. The fire claimed the lives of ten people, five of whom were children as well as the homes of 15 people, the very people who should fall under the category of “Our Own”.

Yet when those 15 people were being re-located to a temporary site the entrance to the new location was blocked by local residences, further exposing how shallow our notion of “Yes Equality” was. The usual bigotry was thrown around “You don’t have to live next to them, you don’t understand”. This clearly exemplified that despite the fact that 60% of us had voted for “equality” Ireland very clearly remains a terribly unequal state with no understanding of what true equality means. This may have something to do with the fact that “equality”, within or without the context of marriage, had nothing to do with the equality referendum vote.

The vote was about validating the idea that queer people can be just like the normal, traditional family that fills our TV screens. They can meet someone that they care for and enter into a monogamous committed relationship that can lead to a piece of paper that grants the couple access to certain state benefits and privileges and maybe even somewhere along the way, or indeed after the piece of paper is obtained, they can have a child or two running about the place.

Historically, marriage was designed as a patriarchal tool to trap women; to trap them financially and sexually as well as to lock them into their social position. Within it, women have suffered, and still to this day continue to suffer, both physical and mental abuse, rape and even murder at the hands of a husband. The economic side of marriage has been and continues to be instrumental in concentrating wealth, power, and privilege into familial ties.

The authoritarian nature of marriage as well as the power dynamic that it creates between man and wife has been fundamental to the shaping of society through the nuclear family. The nuclear family is a family that consists of two (typically married) people (who are generally of the opposite sex) and their children.

The nuclear family is considered by feminists to be the basis of all authoritarian structure with its structure being used as a model for society’s pecking order. The father would be seen as the leader of the family, with his work typically being waged and outside of the home. The mother would be seen as the family’s servant, with her work typically occurring within the home and without a wage. Any sons would be treated like miniature family leaders and daughters as if they were in training for future servitude.

The tone within the home goes something along the lines of “obey your father”, “listen to your father”, “wait ‘til your father gets home then you’ll be sorry”, “wait until your father hears about this”. The lesson that the child is learning is to obey and to kneel to authority.

When this setting occurs within the home, the child is being socialised to obey and respect authority, and to accept a pecking order and to understand it as something that is normal and natural; that some are naturally of a higher social level than others and consequently some are of a lower level. This structure is invaluable to our bosses and politicians in keeping us docile and content with our lot.

Of course, nowadays, marriage has adapted to the change of shape that our society has taken. Women are no longer the property of their husband and can no longer be raped with impunity. While housework still remains unwaged and is not considered a valid form of labour, women do generally seek employment outside of the home, while continuing to labour inside the home.

Fragments of traditional marriage, however, still remain. Marriage is still “an economic arrangement, an insurance pact” (Goldman) which brings with it its own benefits and privileges. We voted for queer couples to gain access to these state benefits and privileges.

Those queers who will enter into marriage will do so with an air of “love is love” and “we are just like your family” – notions that can have an adverse effect onto us queers who do not mirror our heterosexual counterparts; those of us who do deviate from the norm.

Instead of truly fighting homophobia and heteronormativity (the idea that it is normal to be heterosexual and anything else is abnormal) mainstream LGBT society surrendered to the norm and organised around a phenomenon that is not so radical; something that would be respectable and acceptable to those who ten years ago would have been shrieking in horror at the very thought of a Gay Pride parade.

Of course, there are those who marry in order to remain in their spouse’s country of origin, this leads to the question of whether or not refugees have to enter into a same-sex marriage before we accept them here in Ireland? Is that what it takes to get a chunk of this “Yes Equality” pie? What would have looked much more like “Yes Equality” would have been destroying the borders, and the nationalist laws that prevent open access from country to country.

The Yes vote brought with it excitement and emotions. Tears of happiness soaked the faces of those old enough to remember darker and more homophobic times. The majority of society told us that they accepted us; but no matter how many rainbows you dress society up in, we still live in a straight society.

Why didn’t we strive to destroy the straight society; to create a new society based on our own desires for freedom, solidarity, love and equality. We have accepted queer acceptance in a straight society, the very same society that forced us to go door-to-door begging for something that our straight counterparts do not even need to consider – are we really content with our lot?

The same door that was slammed in our faces by the society that Catholic Ireland created was slammed in the faces of refugees – has rainbow flavoured neo-liberalism stripped us of our compassion?

It’s “Yes Equality To All” or it’s “Yes Equality To None” – the decision is ours.

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Retrieved on 21st January 2022 from www.wsm.ie
Published in *Common Threads* Issue 1.

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