

IMMIGRATION EXPERT HAS WELCOME ADVICE

Alan Shatter, the man behind the citizenship ceremony, on why Bryan Fanning's book about the importance of integration deserves to be widely read



Bryan Fanning is professor of migration and social policy at University College Dublin. He not only lectures but has also written extensively about social change in Ireland and emigration.

In his welcome new book, *Diverse Republic*, he describes the Ireland of the first half of the 20th century, how since then the Republic has evolved economically, socially and culturally, and become more liberal, secular, urban and wealthy. He details the changes that resulted from the end to protectionism, the Catholic Church's loss of influence and the abolition and reform of outdated laws inspired by its doctrines.

In doing so, he sets the scene for the book's main focus: the fact that in 2021, the State is a diverse republic, with more than 17pc of its population born outside Ireland, and many of whom have families with children born here.

Emigration dominated our national landscape for decades. For generations, it provided the only means of escaping poverty and unemployment, and achieving economic security and possible prosperity. Immigration into Ireland from outside the British Isles was minimal.

For the past two decades, the Republic has experienced large-scale immigration from both within and outside the EU. As part of a wider consideration of how this has changed Irish society, Fanning examines responses to immigration, efforts at integration and the emergence of anti-immigrant far-right groups.

He sounds a warning, with which I agree, that neither the government, nor mainstream political parties, nor society in general should ignore the existence of these groups. This is despite the fact that as recently as last year's general election, candidates representing their views, some of whom were publicly prominent,

NON-FICTION
Diverse Republic
Bryan Fanning

UCD Press, 160 pages,
hardcover €30



Flying the flag: Lina Chen on the day she became an Irish citizen in 2018. Photo by Steve Humphreys

received minimal support. This, he rightly asserts, should not result in a complacent assumption that their support will not grow. We should also not ignore the fact that some far-right aficionados regularly denigrate others who do not fall within their narrow racist definition of who should be Irish. I know this, having been on the receiving end of anonymous antisemitic targeting and trolling on social media.

To date, no mainstream Irish party has sought to promote and exploit anti-immigrant sentiment. But while all have in different ways advocated integration, Fanning's thesis is that too little has been done to promote this process. Immigrants are also almost invisible in national politics and in Irish media.

Fanning writes that "all migrants, including asylum seekers, should be viewed as future potential Irish citizens from the day they arrive" and that failure to remove deliberate barriers to integration "may contribute to intergenerational social exclusion and damage social cohesion".

I share his view that "any government serious about integrating immigrants needs to become proactive in encouraging immigrants to naturalise" to foster an inclusive perception

of Irishness. He puts great importance on addressing the difficulties of long-term illegal non-EU residents and children born to them since 2004, from which point they no longer had an automatic right to citizenship. Helen McEntee recently announced she was considering reforms in this area.

For too long, successive governments failed to recognise the positive role that naturalisation can play in giving immigrants a sense of belonging, and in others seeing them as fully part of their community.

Past administrations overlooked the fact that the vast majority of resident immigrants seek Irish citizenship because they are firmly rooted in and attached to Ireland. They also overlooked the huge positive contribution made by many in our hospitals, in medicine and nursing, in care homes, in caring for the disabled and the elderly at home and across the economy, some undertaking vital tasks and performing essential services that those born in Ireland avoid.

In 2011, when I became Minister for Justice, I discovered that there was a backlog of 22,000 citizenship applications, with more than 17,000 in a barely moving queue for more than six



The celebratory atmosphere at citizenship ceremonies remains one of my cherished memories

months. Many applicants were waiting three to four years for a decision.

I also discovered that Department of Justice officials were frequently recommended refusing applications for insubstantial reasons. There was no commitment to speedily processing applications, nor insight into the importance that applicants attached to becoming an Irish citizen, nor any great interest in how inexcusable delays affected people's lives.

There was also little concern over the fact that, upon attending the District Court to swear an oath of allegiance, successful applicants were on occasion subjected to racist abuse by some sitting at the back of the court awaiting resumption of criminal prosecutions.

Within weeks, I devised a citizenship ceremony, ensured it was embedded in law, prescribed that all applications, save those of exceptional difficulty, be processed within six months of receipt and required that the backlog be eliminated. Between March 2011 and May 2014, when my time in government ended, about 64,000 people were granted citizenship and

attended ceremonies. This new era has continued, including a virtual ceremony last week.

Fanning is correct to attach importance to citizenship. The obvious sense of pride in becoming Irish felt by the vast majority at citizenship ceremonies and the celebratory atmosphere remains for me a cherished memory of my time in government.

Applying Fanning's insights, urgent action needs now to be taken to address the citizenship backlog that has accumulated, partly due to Covid, and to reduce the delay for deciding on applications from two years to a maximum of six months.

Proposals in the final chapter for a Citizens' Assembly to address a number of important immigration-related issues also deserve serious consideration. Some, in my view, do not require lengthy deliberation. These could be positively addressed by a proactive government and parties committed to embracing diversity and recognising the importance of inclusion to enhance people's lives and maintain social cohesion and stability.

Diverse Republic deserves to be widely read and discussed.