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Final Version

Worlds turned upside down? - The Older People's Uprising, 2008

Rosie Meade

Introduction

> The Government has decided to abolish the automatic entitlement to a medical card for those over seventy who are above the eligibility criteria. Support will be available to this group to help them meet their healthcare costs. An annual cash grant of €400 per person will be paid to those over seventy who do not qualify for a medical card or a GP visit card subject to an income threshold (Brian Lenihan, in Dáil Éireann, 2008a).

Although it was anticipated, Brian Lenihan's budget announcement of 14 October 2008 would kick-start an extraordinary week in Irish politics. The recently promoted Minister for Finance was charged with navigating what he judged 'one of the most difficult and uncertain times in living memory' (Dáil Éireann, 2008a). The still unfolding sub-prime crisis had brought down Lehman Brothers, the US financial services giant, which filed for bankruptcy on September 15th. Ireland's recession was confirmed within ten days by the Central Statistics Office (RTÉ, 2008) and on September 30th Minister Lenihan committed the State to guarantee all banking liabilities for at least two years (see Dukelow, Chapter 9). Prefaced with a grim assessment of the global threats bearing down on the nation, his first budget speech set out the 'historical task' facing the Government and the Irish people as a whole: to stabilise the economy, rationalise expenditure and rein back ineffective 'universal entitlements' (Dáil Éireann, 2008a). The international scale and rapid pace of events – he remarked 'the world financial system has been turned upside down' - rendered this a crisis rather than the 'soft

landing' that was hitherto a mainstay of media prediction (McWilliams, 2008). Nonetheless, Lenihan, invoking the can-do vernacular of the SWOT analysis, exhorted the populace to recognise this 'opportunity for us all to pull together and play our part according to our means' (Dáil Éireann, 2008a). For many older citizens, however, the budget generated alternative or countervailing opportunities: 'pulling together' was re-framed as collective action and solidarity, while 'playing their part' was registered as protest and resistance.

Public commentaries on the recession or citizens' responses to austerity, typically reference the *Older People's Uprising* as an effective if singular demonstration of *people* or '*pensioner power*' (www.herald.ie, 2008). For example, Miriam Lord (2008) of the Irish Times described a 'truly extraordinary' scenario; 'so many elderly people, pillars of their community, committed voters, decent law-abiding men and women, out on the streets laying siege to the Dáil was unprecedented'. More recently Taoiseach Enda Kenny (Dáil Éireann, 2012) evoked his own ambivalent memories of the protests; 'Elderly people were out before when a decision was made about medical cards. They were very articulate and vociferous and knew exactly where the sore point was. Some of those people were in wheelchairs. I do not want to see that'.

The *Uprisin*g was short-lived relative to the other campaigns that are analysed in this volume (Newman, Chapter 3; O'Connell, Chapter 4), but its lingering significance has been endorsed by Atlantic Philanthropies (2013), among others. Atlantic funds a range of Irish NGOs in the name of a 'robust civil society' and its website frames the protests as evidence that its grantee, the Irish Senior Citizens' Parliament, successfully empowered 'older people to advocate for themselves'. In contrast, while economist Colm McCarthy (2008) recognised *the Uprising's* success as a spectacle - 'an apocalyptic reaction to relatively minor expenditure cuts', 'the pensioner's Woodstock' – it was, he argued, emblematic of the public's wrongheaded refusal to admit the gravity of the economic crisis.

This chapter offers a critical reading of *the Uprising* and its place in recent Irish history. It is not a definitive analysis: it cannot capture the personal significance of this 'event' for individual participants; it offers no insights into the advance organisational work by activists and NGOs that advocate with and for older people; and it is guarded in its assessment of *the Uprising's* overall achievements. Instead, I analyse the forms that resistance took and the extent to which it transgressed or reinforced the clientelist norms of political engagement in Ireland. More specifically, I interpret *the Uprising's* political and ethical significance with reference to the Foucauldian concept of counter-conduct. This chapter also contextualises the protests, situating them against an appraisal of the fading status of 'universalism' in social

policy, a decline that is at least partly linked to the ascendance of neo-liberalism. Moreover, given Ireland's historical unease over universal health care, I critique the peculiar and politicised origins of the over-70s medical card in 2001. The *Uprising* was a defining event for a nation in transition to recession but it also exposed some troubling continuities in Irish political discourse and practice. Among them: the resilience of a 'stroke culture' in the policy arena; the on-going subordination of social policy to economic rationalities; and the deployment of ideological dissimulations to undermine public debate about the substantive character of our welfare state.

'People Power! Pensioners show the way' (WSM, 2008: 1)

In popular recollections of *the Uprising* two key events stand out: Age Action Ireland's (AAI) public meeting of October 21st and the *March on the Dáil* by 15,000[1] older people and supporters that occurred a day later (Indymedia Ireland, 2008). The meeting, originally slated for a Dublin hotel, was moved to St Andrew's Church in order to accommodate an estimated crowd of 1,800. By booing and silencing government spokespersons - most notably Minister of State John Moloney - and cheering opposition politicians, attendees registered an apparently unanimous objection to the budget announcement (Healy, 2008). The following day's march coincided with a student demonstration against college fees and once again a government representative, Máire Hoctor, Minister of State for Older People, was heckled and jeered. Various politicians, including Fine Gael Leader Enda Kenny and Labour's Eamon Gilmore, mingled with protesters at the *March…,* which preceded a Dáil vote on an opposition motion to reverse the proposed change (Carbery, 2008). Demonstrators had been mobilised by the Irish Senior Citizens' Parliament (ISCP) and its president Sylvia Meehan gave a spirited defence of universal entitlement as essential for older people's 'citizenship', 'self-respect' and 'dignity' (Carbery, 2008). The lively scenes moved the Irish Times (2008) to editorialise on 'the return of street politics' as the 'grey generation' reminded politicians of the consequences of ignoring their 'health and wellbeing' even if, as it sanctimoniously opined, the 'rudeness of protesters' undermined their cause somewhat.

There was, however, more to *the Uprising* than two Dublin/National gatherings. From budget-day, Joe Duffy's *Liveline*[2] became an animated forum for older people, carers and their lobby groups. Callers described what their medical cards meant to them, vented their anger at

[1] Attendance figures for demonstrations are often disputed and necessarily provisional.
[2] Liveline is a popular radio 'phone-in' show on RTÉ.

Government, disputed its prescription of budgetary cutbacks to older people, and incited others to resist (Liveline, 2008). Marches occurred in Tralee and Clonakilty and an estimated 2000 attended the Campaign for a Real Public Health Service demonstration in Cork on October 18th (Indymedia Ireland, 2008-2009). Protesters picketed the constituency offices of Minister for Defence, Willie O'Dea, and Minister for Health, Mary Harney, and on October 25th, in order to sustain *the Uprising*'s momentum, 'up to 200 people of all ages braved appalling weather conditions' at a march in Limerick (Limerick Leader, 2008).

In Ireland boundaries between left and right have been blurred by the dominance of a populist and clientelist political culture - exemplified in the 'TD's clinic' - which obliges national legislators to prove their responsiveness to the needs of local constituents (Kirby and Murphy, 2011; O'Carroll, 1987). Interestingly this same tradition was successfully exploited by protesters as they targeted elected representatives: the ISCP urged members **to** 'Get out There! Get Working! Get talking to your local politicians and demand that this be withdrawn' (Hayes, 2008). A forum of Fianna Fáil councillors responded with an 'emergency' convention in Ballinasloe, making known its 'anger that there would be any possibility of anyone losing their entitlement' and advising the Taoiseach to reconsider the plans (Siggins, 2008). As they practised their democratic right to protest, many participants in *the Uprising* self-identified as voters – "we voted 4 you now vote 4 us". The implied threat of an electoral backlash by older people fuelled mutterings of rebellion on the backbenches of Fianna Fáil, prompted TD Joe Behan to resign from the party and caused Independent Finian McGrath to withdraw support from the coalition government.

By the time of the *March…* the Government had already wavered in its approach to means-testing yet still refused to concede on the promised abandonment of universality. Instead it proposed self-administered assessments that relied on 'better-off' older people to relinquish their cards. Public pressure forced repeated revisions of the new eligibility thresholds and as the controversy rumbled on, five alternative versions were publicised. Evidently the budget announcement had been rushed, ministers had not negotiated with the Irish Medical Organisation (IMO) around a fee structure and the Health Service Executive (HSE) struggled to specify the new criteria (Donnellan, 2008a). This only partly explains the confusion, however; the revisions were designed to neutralise popular disquiet and Mary Harney reassured the public that only 20,000, as opposed to the previously anticipated 125,000, would lose their cards. The Government's tenacity in disposing of the principle of universality seemed curiously at odds with efforts to minimise the numbers affected, a paradox that would prompt the ISCP (n.d.) to question the deeper purpose of this 'elaborate clerical exercise'.

Undoubtedly, the protests succeeded in preserving the entitlements of many who would otherwise have lost them. *The Uprising* was provoked by a tangible policy change but also reflected concerns about the status of older people in Ireland and the subordination of social provision to the putative demands of the economy. The protests worked what Jessica Kulynych (1997:333) calls the 'dual meaning' of *demonstration.* The first, more typical usage relates to how demonstrations 'point out' or articulate protesters' interests or grievances (*ibid.*). As placards at the *March…* testified,

"Age 85 Need Help to Stay Alive
I Need my Medical Card Please"
"A Budget to Die for"

Alternatively demonstration translates as 'a show' or 'performance' whereby 'defiance [is] embodied in action that flies in the face of acceptability' (*ibid.*). Protests enumerated older people's fears, arguments and demands but also *demonstrated* their capacities for transgressive and resistant conduct. Ageist constructions of older people as passive, passé or burdensome were countered by protesters who embodied the activist role. Carrying banners declaiming 'Older and Bolder' or wearing tee-shirts with the AAI logo they performed their shared spirit of collective purpose, while, for some at least, picketing clinics or shouting down TDs signified a willingness to transgress the polite norms of political engagement.

The Uprising also revealed the breadth and force of an older people's lobby and its political efficacy. National organisations like AAI and the ISCP played a central mobilising role, but even at the *March…* protesters demonstrated local affiliations – "The Banner Fights Back", "National Widows Association Drogheda Branch", "Tara Disabled Mineworkers and Pensioners". This underscored the geographical range and legitimacy of their resistance while simultaneously putting TDs and councillors on notice. It also tapped into popular disquiet regarding the quality and accessibility of Irish health services, disquiet that had not been allayed by the economic boom of the preceding decade.

Economising and politicising the medical card

Condemnation of Ireland's two-tier or 'apartheid' (Burke, 2009) health services is commonplace. The health system itself is complex; private and public services coexist and even overlap, and entitlements are finely graduated so that only a minority qualify for free

access to primary services via the medical card regime[3]. According to the WHO/European Observatory on Health Systems and Health Policies (2012:60) 'Ireland is the only EU health system that does not offer universal coverage of primary care'. While there are seams of universalism within the system[4], in its character and functioning it actively promotes inequality. Most obviously, private medical insurance legitimises accelerated admittance to a raft of secondary services (Burke, 2009). Orla McDonnell and Órla O'Donovan's (2009) research traces the anti-welfarism that informed the promotion of private health insurance during the 1950s and explores how policy-makers continue to represent it as a marker of moral responsibility and community solidarity today. In effect individuals and families are responsibilised to demonstrate their consumer sovereignty and self-sufficiency by insuring themselves against risk, and in so doing relieve the State, fellow citizens and the public system of the 'weight' of their dependency (*ibid*.).

Ostensibly selective entitlement to medical cards seems redistributive, ring-fencing free access to services for those whose medical needs outweigh their individual capacities to pay. Problematically, however, means tests impose arbitrary lines between those who qualify and those who do not: marginal improvements in earnings can render former recipients illegible, and this very prospect emerged as a recurring anxiety for *Liveline* callers on budget day. Although means-testing is typically rationalised with reference to its effectiveness at targeting the *neediest*, the success of Ireland's health system is questionable in this regard. Research suggests that the proportion of the population entitled to medical cards fell during the Celtic Tiger period because income thresholds did not keep pace with economic growth (Layte, Nolan and Nolan, 2007). In particular the 'working poor' were disadvantaged by eligibility criteria that were seen to 'penalise families with children' (Keilthy, 2009:16).

In his December 2000 budget speech the then Minister for Finance Charlie McCreevy announced that from 2001 all Irish residents aged over 70 would become eligible for medical cards, irrespective of means. This move seemed counter-intuitive given the market orientation of much health policy and McCreevy was an unlikely champion of universalism. He had previously caricatured critics of his tax reduction and individualisation measures as 'left-wing pinkos' because, allegedly, 'money belonged to the people who earned it and not the state' (Dowling, 2000). Nonetheless the new measure was rationalised as the logical conclusion of

[3] Between the 1940s and 1950s attempts to universalise access to health services were resisted by the Roman Catholic hierarchy and Ireland's professional medical lobby.

[4] All Irish residents are entitled to public hospital services 'free of charge or at a reduced cost' (HSE, 2012) and all pregnant women are eligible for maternity care under the 'Maternity and Infant Care Scheme' (HSE, 2010)

his policy agenda: '[i]n my 1999 Budget, I announced that the income limits for Medical Cards for people aged 70 years or over would be doubled over three years... That process will be completed next March, and it is now proposed to take the next step' (Dáil Éireann, 2000).

His announcement framed the extension of entitlement, which had been recommended by advocacy groups (e.g. National Council on Ageing and Older People, 1999), as proof of Government's commitment to '[a] Fairer Society'. Despite making much of its welfare credentials, the speech also reiterated policy-making's bottom-line; the 'over-riding need to keep our economy competitive and… ensure that this is reflected in our approach to how we reward ourselves' (Dáil Éireann, 2000). Since the foundation of the State in 1922 decisions about the form and substance of welfare are typically deemed ancillary to economic considerations, a tendency John Clarke (2007) describes as the 'subordination of the social'. This means that the expansion or retrenchment of welfare is rationalised first and foremost with reference to economics rather than *a priori* concepts of need or justice. Comparing the speeches of McCreevy and Lenihan we see how both the gifting and withdrawal of medical cards were framed as consistent with prudent management of the economy. Lofty references to national solidarity – McCreevy's 'fairer society with opportunity for all', Lenihan's '[t]his Budget serves no vested interest' – mask what Mary Murphy (2012:358) denotes as Ireland's 'dominant technocratic ideology'. In other words, economic governance is represented as immune from or transcendent of political dispute, while its role in sustaining social inequality is obscured.

Announcing the over-70s scheme, McCreevy reassured the public that in drafting the budget he had duly considered representations from the social partners. From the 1980s, successive governments secured agreement with business, farming and trade union sectors around a regime of low corporation taxes, industrial peace, competiveness, and flexibilisation of the public sector; all standard elements of the neo-liberal package (Meade, 2012). As Jamie Peck (2004:403) explains, however, neo-liberalism 'cannot, exist in pure form, but only manifests itself in hybrid formations'. Against more archetypical tendencies such as dismantling welfare or 'pitting the state against trade unions' (Kitchin *et al*., 2012:1307), Ireland's distinctive hybrid was underpinned by the consensus ideology of partnership and some strategic concessions to social policy. In 1996 the elevation of the Community and Voluntary Pillar to the ranks of national partnership created a space from which its members could pursue enhanced recognition of their *social* sector, while defending and (even) extending the welfare entitlements of their constituencies. Within these arrangements, AAI and the ISCP became recognised as the voices of older people. While the comparative influence of the

Community and Voluntary Pillar within social partnership is questionable, it may have contributed to a "'softer", more muted...more consensual' (Peck, 2004:393) application of neo-liberalism whereby some welfare gains were secured, among them the over-70s card.

If ministers attempted to make the medical card fit with their economic agendas, they used it to further narrow political agendas as well. Mel Cousins's (2007) work on 'budget-cycles' highlights the tendency for incumbent governments to expand social security spending at key moments in order to enhance their prospects of re-election (also Murphy, 2012). Putting it more crudely, McCreevy's move was widely recognised as an archetypical Fianna Fáil stroke: a pre-emptive effort to buy off older voters and boost the party's PR in advance of the 2002 election (Burke, 2009: Whelan, 2008). In the clientelist culture of Irish politics unsuccessful medical card applicants often lobby TDs for a review of their cases and McCreevy's gesture reflected this familiar *modus operandi,* but on a grander scale. Paddy O'Carroll (1987:44) remarks that strokes are defined by a discernible 'theatricality' – e.g. the big-stage budget speech – but also occur on the 'fringes of acceptability'. Critics accused McCreevy of wilfully misdirecting resources, favouring comparatively well-off pensioners over more needful cases (Burke, 2009), and Fintan O'Toole (2005) estimated that up to 8,000 other people who 'actually need medical cards' lost them, because the 'State couldn't afford the cost'. Although probably not intended by O'Toole, some of the wider commentary approximated the hackneyed *deserving versus undeserving* formula that undercuts populist discourses about welfare. Dr James Reilly - later to become Fine Gael's spokesperson on health and later still health minister - then chair of the IMO's GP committee, decried McCreevy's measure: 'government is handing out free medical cards to people who can afford golf club fees and at the same time neglecting those who can not afford to attend to their children's health' (www.irishhealth.com, 2000). In an under-appreciated Damascene conversion, he subsequently condemned Brian Lenihan's budget: an 'attack on the elderly under the guise of patriotism, when it was more like an act of terrorism. The principle is simple: universal health care for everyone over the age of 70' (Dáil Éireann, 2008b). Viewing this controversy over the longer term, it becomes clear that Fianna Fáil holds no monopoly on strokes.

The 'burdens' of universalism

The principle of universalism provides for freely accessible services, payments, utilities or goods where 'an essential link is forged between the extension of social rights and citizenship' (Thompson and Hoggett, 1996:26; Danson *et al.*, 2012). It renders benefits non-negotiable:

irrespective of our identities, means or geographical location we can avail of them without prejudice and without charge. Citizenship rights and welfare entitlements are, therefore, mutually affirming. For Richard Titmuss (1965:19), one of the architects of Britain's National Health Service, universalism was intrinsically linked to the 'demand for one society': 'for non-discriminatory services for all without distinction of class, income or race: for services and relations which would deepen and enlarge self-respect: for services which would manifestly encourage social integration'. Hitching universal rights to redistributive taxation and social insurance systems would, he hoped, bolster the broader public's engagement with and allegiance to the welfare state. Titmuss (1965) presciently argued that means-tested, or what he termed *discriminatory*, benefits segregate recipients, constructing them as burdensome and as a drain on the economy. If in the public mind the link between availing of and contributing to the cost of benefits is broken (Alcock, 2011; Danson *et al.*, 2012), the welfare state becomes regarded as an expensive yet residualised sphere beyond the direct experience of the majority. Furthermore, what might seem like a clerical exercise is a disciplinary practice. Means-testing is designed to weed out those judged as claiming irresponsibly, immorally or unfairly: it affects a sceptical attitude towards entitlement, thus stigmatising and exceptionalising recipients. This tendency intensifies in times of austerity when retrenchment forces the needful into ever more testing competition for scarce resources and the concept of need is itself narrowed.

Because the over-70s card was crudely politicised from its introduction, an opportunity for informed public debate on universalism's social benefits and broader scope was sacrificed. Facing down the threat of retrenchment *the Uprising* created a vital space from which older people could both defend and promote the benefits of the universal card based on personal experience. The ISCP's pre-Budget Submission (2008) called for the extension of the scheme to all those aged sixty five and over, bravely asserting the card's social worth even as hegemonic discourses pushed the inevitability of austerity. Likewise, Robin Webster of AAI, anticipating the withdrawal of automatic entitlement argued that it would undermine 'the current push towards community care and the drive to keep older people out of hospitals and nursing homes. It would not result in any reduction in illness among older people but ensure that by the time they came to doctors' surgeries that their illnesses would be more advanced' (Lavery, 2008).

Government spokespeople adopted a somewhat anomalous position in order to defuse support for universalism: medical card retraction was essential for economic well-being but would disadvantage only a minority of better-off older people. Nonetheless, sceptical

protesters were mindful that a more fundamental right was being sacrificed and Phonsie Franklin, an organiser of the Limerick march on October 25th, warned:

> This protest is solely about the over-70s, and their entitlement to the medical card. At the outset, the government wanted to save €100m, but only five per cent of people are losing their medical card. The government are only getting €5m. What the hell is that all about? It just serves to allow the government to con the people again. Next year, 20 per cent of people will lose their card, and the year after it will be 30 per cent (Limerick Leader, 2008).

There is a broader context for these developments. Neo-liberalism or what Nikolas Rose (1999) calls *advanced liberalism* has no truck with universalism, and conceptions of the social state, solidarity, and even public-ness have lost their leverage as the opposing principles of marketisation, individualisation and privatisation, somewhat ironically, have been universalised. As its core functions are redrawn, the State must ensure that all national policies, irrespective of the sphere, actively enable 'a market to exist', that they 'create and sustain the central elements of economic well-being' (*ibid.*:141). In this framework the enterprising, self-sufficient individual who exercises (responsible) choice with impunity becomes the poster-child of subjectivity. To expect governments to directly provide broad based services and welfare, or to guarantee some kind of 'incremental progress for all' (*ibid.*) is, apparently, to hark back to an outdated, sluggish and expensive model of state interventionism. In a climate of austerity, it becomes increasingly difficult to protect the principle of universalism against charges of wastefulness and inefficiency, even when research points to the contrary. As Mike Danson and colleagues (2012:8) explain, evidence demonstrates 'a clear and established causal link between equality and sustainable and sustained economic development, and universal benefits are the bedrock of all the European societies who lead the rankings which measure economic success in particular'.

Brian Lenihan's budget speech (Dáil Éireann, 2008a) affirmed Ireland's allegiance to the current hegemony - '[w]e have a low tax burden by European standards. As a country, we have made a choice to reward work and enterprise' - but in the name of political stability, governments must generate a measure of social consensus around potentially unpopular policies. Given that the budget proposed tough medicine for tough times, Lenihan (Dáil Éireann, 2008a) also found it necessary to frame this as 'no less than a call to patriotic action.' Again, as Nikolas Rose (1999:145) explains, patriotism, with its connotations of solidarity and collectivity, might be understood as the obverse of economic rationality which is presented as selfish and self-interested. In advanced-liberalism, however, economic rationality is

characterized as the *ne plus ultra* of patriotic commitment. Drawing on the discourses of romantic nationalism – 'we can secure the gains which have been the achievement of the men and women of this country' (Dáil Éireann, 2008a) – the minister sought to revive Fianna Fáil's traditional skill at mobilising populist feeling (O'Carroll, 1987:51). His calls for patriotic action resemble the discourses of 'virtuous necessity' (Clarke and Newman, 2012) that have gained traction in the UK recently. They too solder economic rationalisations for cutbacks to a moralistic rhetoric of 'responsibility and interdependence' (*ibid.*:303). *The Uprising*, however, demonstrated protesters' explicit refusal of those discourses. Many who attended the Cork and Dublin marches wore or waved tricolours, while others wielded banners bearing more subversive reflections on patriotism:

"Hatchet Harney and Patriot Lenihan Out!"

"Our Patriotic Duty Revolution"

Defending and rationalising medical card retrenchment, Minister Lenihan also appealed to vague concepts of fairness and the presumed inefficiencies of universalism.

'Government policy is to target resources at those in greatest need. Universal entitlements irrespective of means do not target those in greatest need… in some cases there is a need to differentiate between those who have and those who have not' (Dáil Éireann, 2008a). His ideological line was embellished by party colleague Mary O'Rourke who mocked the pledges to universalism that were emanating from the opposition benches.

> [T]he Labour Party represents socialism, the essence of which is that those who deserve something get it, and those who do not deserve it do not. This allows one to target scarce resources at those most in need. I understood that to be the essence of socialism. It appears this is no longer the case because the Labour Party now wishes everybody over the age of 70 years to get a medical card, regardless of means. ... Second, a quality of the Fine Gael Party that I have always admired is that of self-reliance, that one should provide for oneself where possible and should not rely on Government (Dáil Éireann, 2008c).

Such ideologically charged interventions inverted Titmuss's arguments about the relationship between equality and universalism by disassociating the principle of free access from that of redistributive taxation. They also sought to cultivate resentment. Tánaiste Mary Coughlan ridiculed efforts to retain the cards of 'well-off pensioners,… senior civil servants, High Court Judges, property tycoons, ministers of state and hospital consultants' (Kerr, 2008);

a veritable rogues gallery of those deemed culpable for the excesses of the Celtic Tiger. Taoiseach Brian Cowen claimed that higher income taxes 'could put many people's jobs at risk' (O'Brien, 2008) while Mary Harney, interviewed for Marian Finucane's radio show, observed that 'we are moving away from universality… when you give something to everybody regardless then it means that somebody else needs it more' (RTÉ, 2008a).

Again there are parallels with other contexts where austerity has become normalised in the wake of the global economic crisis. Identifying the resurgence of 'anti-welfarism' internationally, Paul Hoggett *et al* (2013), recognise how it resuscitates the *deserving versus undeserving* binary, fuelling resentment of a mythologised class of feckless or parasitic benefit-consumers. Anti-welfarism undermines public faith in welfare per se, ostensibly in the name of a 'fairness agenda' (*ibid.*). Instead of being seen to (somewhat) equalise opportunity or reduce poverty, the welfare state is recast as a discriminatory mechanism that penalises so-called hard-working responsible citizens. This rhetoric, which gains credibility precisely because universalism as both a principle and a practice has been deposed, has been shamelessly exploited by the UK's Conservative/Liberal Democratic coalition in its unprecedented attack on welfare (*ibid.*). During *the Uprising*, the Irish government built its defence by targeting supposedly better-off or more prosperous pensioners. In doing so it fostered competition within a self-defining community of interest and reflected back the uglier face of the contemporary 'fairness agenda': 'one which foments rivalries and inequalities rather that building solidarities among those who "have little"' (Hoggett *et al.*, 2013:16).

This section has considered some ideological aspects of the medical card controversy. Government spokespersons retreated into populism, patriotism and resentment but they also 'dissimulated' (Thompson, 1990) as they sought to deflect important social policy issues arising from the debate. Minister Harney even tried to convince the public that *the Uprising* had nothing to do with universalism, claiming that only one person who had addressed her about the controversy had mentioned the principle (RTÉ, 2008a). However, on RTÉ (2008a) that same morning Joe Behan asserted that he was leaving Fianna Fáil because of his commitment to universal health care and two days later it was named 'Fine Gael policy' (O'Regan, 2008). Although government spokespersons repeatedly invoked the spectre of universalism, whether directly or by implication, Mary Harney still maintained that medical card retrenchment was not 'a matter of principle or policy' (O'Regan, 2012), and thus sought to deny its deeper political implications.

Government representatives also dissimulated around the specific conditions that rendered the over-70s medical card scheme so costly. When McCreevy announced the scheme

in 2000 the cabinet had not secured a fully costed agreement with the IMO around a fee structure for GPs (Burke, 2009: Donnellan, 2008). The negotiating strength and privileged status of that professional body ensured that by the time of the scheme's introduction doctors would receive an annual capitation fee of €640 for each non-means-tested over 70 year old patient. When contrasted with the standard €160 medical-card fee, older patients became more lucrative for GP practices. It was this deal, and not universalism per se, that ultimately skewed the cost of provision towards an unanticipated €243 million annually (Burke, 2009:298).

The Uprising as 'counter-conduct'

Since 2008 the discourses and practices of austerity have been firmly implanted in the Irish policy-making field. As Kieran Allen (2012) observes, the IMF and EU Commission look upon Ireland as their 'model pupil' thanks to its willing implementation of spending cutbacks over a series of budgets. Media pundits regularly speculate on the scale of public discontent and the (un)likelihood of its fermentation into mass resistance. In these discussions *the Uprising* almost inevitably features as a yardstick of what is both possible and improbable. For the Irish Left in particular, sources of inspiration are precious, and in its immediate aftermath, the anarchist Workers Solidarity Movement (WSM) (2008:1) optimistically hailed the *Uprising* as a sign that 'politics in Ireland had changed drastically'. At the *March…* there *was* a sense that the deeper roots of Ireland's crisis were being interrogated by protesters. Many placards countered government constructions of need, economic rationality and the costliness of medical cards, by re-forging connections between mismanagement of the financial sector and the crisis in public finances.

"Hands off the medical cards for the over-70s
Stop the bleeding of the needy
To fill the pockets of the greedy"
"Levy Bank Profits"
"Rob the Pensioners to Bail out the Bankers
Shame, Shame, Shame"

Recent protests that have centred on 'sectional' interests or focussed on 'local mobilizations' against service withdrawal (Allen, 2012:436-7) have, in some instances, secured vital revisions or temporary reversals of policies. However, neither they nor the high-profile boycotts of new charges and taxes have been consolidated within a sustained and broad-based culture of resistance. Against the early optimism of the WSM, there is understandable disappointment

in the Left that, as Laurence Cox (2012:n.p.) acknowledges, 'our movements have been rolled over so quickly'.

The Foucauldian concept of 'counter-conduct' is useful when analysing *the Uprising* and what it might reveal about the limits of resistance in Ireland. It helps us assess the extent to which protest broke with dominant discourses and political processes but equally how it played with and reflected back existing power configurations. Introducing this concept during the College De France lecture series (1977-8) Michel Foucault (2007) situates 'counter-conduct' alongside his analytical account of 'governmentality'; a concept that in turn captures how power – *to govern* – in contemporary society is oriented towards the 'conduct of conduct' (Davidson, 2011; Death, 2010). It is not only governments that govern. Whether deployed via state policy instruments, the Troika's periodic reviews, the counsel of professional 'experts', or exhortations to self by individual actors, *to govern* means to validate and call particular forms of conduct into being. Appeals that citizens 'play their part' or 'share the pain' are thus distinctive efforts at government in our era of austerity. But government is not always effective or successful, and Foucault (2009:201-2) acknowledges those varying instances of 'resistance, refusal or revolt' - collectively 'counter-conduct' - that 'struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others'. By refusing to shoulder the consequences of economic mismanagement or act like compliant patriots, older people in their various ways resisted government through their counter-conduct.

Foucault did not concede to a purist conception of resistance as external to or alienated from an opposing power. Instead power and resistance are represented as mutually constitutive, while government and counter-conduct co-exist within a similar dyad. But as Arnold Davidson (2011:27) clarifies this does not render counter-conduct 'a merely negative or reactive phenomenon'. More than a kneejerk 'NO', counter-conduct has something productive to say about government as it is actioned in our personal, cultural, social and political spheres. It is 'an active intervention… in the domain of the ethical and political practices and forces that shape us' (Davidson, 2011:32). For many participants in the *Uprising*, this was an opportunity to face down ageism, as reflected in the budget's targeting of older people and as a force within Irish society. Underscoring Foucauldian arguments about the co-dependency of power and resistance, they sometimes appropriated ostensibly ageist language as they did so.

"Mary what's next Euthanasia?"

"OAP not RIP"

"Just Shoot Us. It would be quicker".

Similarly, if the Government denied the deeper politics of medical card retrenchment, presenting it as technocratic solution for an economy gone adrift, demonstrators accentuated the political by prophesying their future conduct as voters.

"Fianna Fáil Out"
"Fianna Fáil
You discriminate
We'll eliminate"
"No Means Test
Voters will not forget"

The concept of counter-conduct recognises that events like the *Uprising* are ethically informed and expressive of agency. Qualitative research by Jackie Fox and Sarah Quinn (2012) explores the motivations and formative experiences of seven participants in the protests. It recognises the growing prominence of extra-parliamentary activism by older people in European politics, while exploring *the Uprising's* contribution to the (re)making of interviewees' own activist identities. This is important work, not least because much of the media coverage at the time patronised the protesters. Analysing the *Irish Independent* and *Irish Star's* reporting on the protests, researchers found that although coverage was broadly critical of the Government, demonstrating 'sympathy for and solidarity with older people', the newspapers drew on ageist stereotypes to frame older people as 'victims', 'frail, infirm or vulnerable, or as unlikely 'radicals' (Fealy *et al.*, 2012:90-3). Even when coverage breaks with standard media preoccupations with supposedly dangerous, violent or semi-professional protesters, it continues to disparage *protest* as aberrant or extraordinary, particularly for older citizens.

It is tempting to bite back at smarmy media reports by over-estimating the activist credentials of older people, but if we want to appreciate what changes and what stays the same with protest, we need to be cautious. Carl Death (2010:245) admits that 'the political subjectivities performed through protests' are often 'exaggerated or momentary' but, crucially, this does not render them 'unimportant or insignificant'. Examining the 'components' of counter-conduct we can register the context-specific forms that resistance takes in this era of neo-liberal governmentality, yet avoid giving 'a sacred status to this or that person as a dissident' (Foucault, 2009:202). The most prominent, although certainly not all, events associated with the *Uprising* were led by organisations, AAI and ISCP, with a previous involvement in social partnership. They were also members of the Older and Bolder NGO

alliance that lobbies for positive-ageing social policies. Assessing *the Uprising's* political significance, Patricia Conboy (2008:11), Older and Bolder's project director, wrote: '[w]e have also seen what happens when major policy change is introduced without effective consultation and communication with the people most affected by that change. In this case it was older people and their message has been clear "nothing about us without us"'.

We cannot know if this statement encapsulates the hopes or aspirations of all who participated in activism over that eventful week. Clearly, for some lead organisations at least, participation in protest was not indicative of a rejection of partnership with the State; instead this was an opportunity to embed it further. In Ireland's post-corporatist climate, 'binary conflict' (Death, 2010: 247) between authentic outsiders and insiders is somewhat difficult to map. Likewise, *the Uprising* did not constitute a rupture with the clientelist norms of representative democracy in Ireland. Protests were centred on the Dáil or constituency offices; opposition politicians were conspicuously present at the *March*…; some protesters carried banners with Fine Gael, Labour and Socialist Party logos; while others hailed Joe Behan's decision to exit Fianna Fáil. Simultaneously reflecting and reproducing the personality fixated character of Irish politics, placards singled out individual ministers;

"Shame on you Brian for even tryin"

"2 Brians No Brain"

"Harney you're fired"

"Hard hearted Harney"

"Who's the real virus in Health?"

Although reproachful of ministers perceived as betraying the interests of older people, conversely those placards affirmed and thus reinforced their status as authoritative decision makers. This reminds us that counter-conducts are 'closely linked to the regimes of power' (Death, 2010:240) they oppose and in that they are reflective of the hybridised, contradictory and governmentalized times in which we live. The *Uprising* was an expression of countervailing power by protesters who sought to conduct the conduct of their elected representatives. They adroitly adopted tactics and techniques that won the attention of the wider public, mass media and political elites. But power relationships and politics in Ireland had *not* changed drastically; instead clientelist traditions were refracted through protest tactics, and afterwards ministers still behaved as if social policy is an after-thought to economic and electoral considerations.

Conclusion

The *Uprising* showed that significant numbers of older people were unwilling to walk meekly into austerity's embrace as they demonstrated their collective capacity to mobilise, picket, protest and shape public debates. Even though neo-liberalism has been compromised by the global economic crisis, policy makers in Ireland and elsewhere seem unwilling to abandon its orthodoxies. The budget of October 2008, and those that followed, privilege a reified model of economic stability: one that renders other considerations – health, welfare, justice or culture – secondary and subordinate. There is nothing particularly new about this and the evolution of social policy since Independence has been variously constrained and enabled by economic rationalisations. Neo-liberalism, however, brings its own distinctive threats for those who are committed to the survival and expansion of the welfare state along democratic and egalitarian lines. As Jacques Donzelot (2008:12) observes 'social policy is no longer a means for countering the economic, but a means for sustaining the logic of competition'. New discourses of fairness meet a resurgent anti-welfarism, as policy makers urge citizens to follow 'choice' and 'opportunity' into the market-place. Meanwhile those judged needful, deserving or entitled to benefits are represented as a necessarily diminishing sub-group constituted by society's most marginal citizens. Recognising that the health needs of older people are unlikely to be prioritised in this climate, many protesters at *the March…* carried mocked-up posters for the Coen Brothers' film, *No Country for Old Men*. If Irish discourses about the economy affect a common-sense or technocratic character, discourses about welfare reek with judgement. Applicants must prove the legitimacy of their need as thresholds go higher; patriotism requires that we endorse welfare retrenchment and find a new competitive edge.

As counter-conduct *the Uprising* publicly affirmed the legitimacy of universal provision for older people, if not for all. Fine Gael grafted the concept onto its health policy and the Irish Times initiated a brief debate on its ethics and effectiveness (Clancy and McDowell, 2008; Keenan, 2008). Neo-liberalism dismisses universalism as a relic of the past and there is a pleasing symmetry in the fact that those who themselves struggle against ageist labels emerged as its champions. Demonstrating the crucial distinction between social solidarity and social consensus, protesters spoke eloquently of the difference the medical card made to their lives, countered the ethics of the bank bail-out and warned politicians that as voters they would remember. However, through a series of ideological dissimulations and revised eligibility criteria, the Government successfully withdrew automatic entitlement. Fine Gael and Labour condemned the proposal in 2008, but in 2014 oversee its administration and they still have not clarified the structure of their promised universal model of GP care.

The Uprising reveals that counter-conduct works with and within constraints. Protesters did not claim or hold out for new political horizons; instead they projected the clientelist bargain on to the national stage. They won concessions with regard to eligibility thresholds and raised the spectre of a sensitive and mobile older people's vote. Undoubtedly, these are victories but after *the Uprising* the ways we think and talk about social policy, whether practising government or resistance, remain largely unchanged. Finally, the IMF (2011) and EU (European Commission, 2012) continue to express concerns regarding the cost of universal benefits, particularly those linked to age, so that every year the Budget is preceded by tedious media speculation about the fate of child benefit or free travel for older people. Let's hope that the events of *the Older People's Uprising* continue to haunt the collective memory of policy makers, warning them against acceding to IMF and EU demands on the expansion of means-testing across the policy field. If so, this would be another unanticipated but still vital success for *the Uprising*: not on the scale that we on the Left envisage or need, but an important step towards salvaging principles of solidarity in these deeply demoralising times.

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