

Irish approve kicking spouses to the curb

■ **OUR OPINION:** The right to divorce solves some problems but could create others

Ah yes, the luck of the Irish.

Finally, being a citizen of the emerald isle is not synonymous with being a devout Catholic or living one's life trapped in a loveless or abusive marriage. The Irish have spoken: They want a divorce.

In the closest voting decision in its history, 50.2 percent of the country cast its ballot in favor of a referendum that would allow couples to sever the tie that binds. Although would-be divorcees must be separated for four of five years and prove "no reasonable prospect of reconciliation" to file for divorce, the decision marks Ireland's most significant break with the church to date.

Until now, Ireland was the only western country that did not allow divorce under any circumstances. In many respects, including abortion and contraception, the country has been one of the Catholic church's last government-sanctioned strongholds in the western world.

As such, this narrow victory is seen as a major setback for dictated morality. It may not be a divorce from Catholicism, but it is a serious separation.

Aside from any religious affiliations, the decision gains some important ground for the Irish. The mandate from the church prevented thousands of couples from leaving a painful relationship behind or being able to find love again.

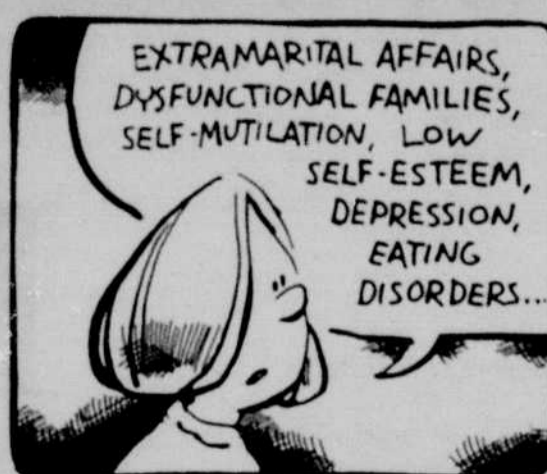
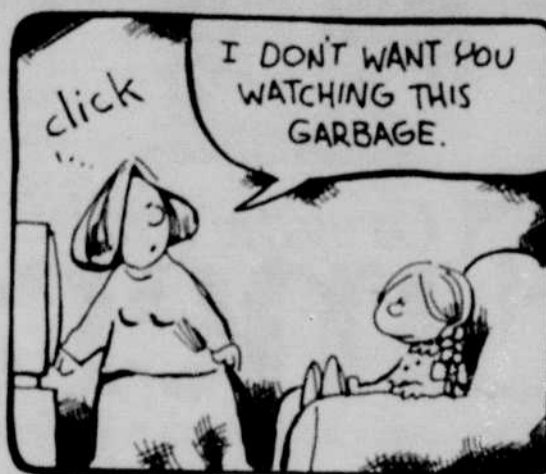
Marriage without divorce as an option locked many people into unions that turned sour and from which there was no escape. Women with abusive or unfaithful husbands were unable to end the torment and humiliation. They were told to endure.

Apparently, for these and other reasons, a majority of the Irish decided they couldn't take it any longer. An estimated 40,000 Irish couples had previously been denied permission to remarry, and it is assumed, will be first in line to dissolve their unhappy unions.

However, as much of a gain as the referendum is for human freedom of choice, it cannot be celebrated without some reservation. After all, divorce has not exactly been the greatest freedom to grace America, nor the rest of the world.

As much as we tout the rights of the individual to determine the course of their life, it is clear that marriage in this country has ceased to be an "until-death-do-you-part" prospect. Rather, with a divorce rate that continues to hover near the 50 percent mark, tying the knot has become a promise easily untied.

Of course, divorce is not solely responsible for rising teenage crime rates, teen pregnancy and the millions of single-parent families living below the poverty line, but it is a critical part of the problem. As such, while we may laud the Irish for their willingness to embrace this particular American freedom, the worst thing that could come of their decision would be to follow in our footsteps.



U.S. politics breeds uncaring voters

Apathy. Political doldrums. Fear and loathing in the ballot boxes. Fear and loathing when Clinton told the Checkersque story of his childhood growing up in a dysfunctional home. Must we baby-sit our President's inner child?

Relief in the midst of apathy when Pete 'I sued my own state while Governor' Wilson dropped out of the presidential race. One less Republican clone to not think about.

Genuine sadness followed by heavier doses of apathy when Colin Powell announced that his family was more important than the presidency. Why didn't Bush think of that one?

Apathy is the insignia of American voters. The people who want our votes say we're lazy, ignorant, 'disenfranchised', or too cheap to buy a stamp. They never think it might be them.

Years of pleasing the folks with the votes in the conservative center have made the Republicans and Democrats as bland as baked squash. Their shrinking ideological differences have stagnated into automatic voting rituals that reduce Congressional decisions to a game of numbers.

They bicker over cosmetic changes like an old married couple. Occasionally they swap White House duty to keep the magic alive. But they haven't offered anything genuinely new since Federalism was an option.

Maybe once you tried to stand up for choice. You rattled your little flag and charged into the ballot booth with your No. 2 lead pencil thinking, this time I'm voting Independent, damn it. So you scribble in the name of a scientist from the Green Party, or Ross Perot, or your neighbor.

But your efforts are puny. It would take 1,000 people like you from each of the five congressional districts in Oregon to put your neighbor on the presidential ballot. Most state laws make 'ballot access' a euphemism for 'fat chance.'

Discouraged, you drift back to the Republican/Democrat fold — sucked in by the security of the usual 'solutions' and the same old faces. It's false security, but in politics that's the only kind available. Don't make waves in the cesspool, the story goes, because the stuff will splash into everybody's mouth. So you stick to the devil you know even though he's a crashing bore.

Congratulations and welcome to bipartisan politics. The country's going to hell and nobody's happy, but it works, right?

Sure, if you don't count the five times in the last 14 years that the government has had to grind to a petulant halt because of in-fighting. It seems once they get our money they can't decide how best to overspend it. Their pre-

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dictable crises ensure that there will be no sewage splashed — nor real progress made. It's the perfect flawed system for a public that fears the unfamiliar.

The rewards of resignation are identical candidates politicizing so-called 'tough' issues such as abortion which have no business as political platforms. Or unimaginative approaches to budget reform like slowing — not stopping — the rate at which we go bankrupt.

Hence, apathy. And hard on the heels of apathy is nostalgia for something voters haven't really had in years: choice. A viable third party. Full-scale electoral reform. New ideas, even if they're wacky.

Snapshot polls have been predicting third party success for a long time. A 1991 Times Mirror Center poll found that almost half the country was in favor of a third party. When they surveyed Americans again in September a record 62 percent supported the creation of a third party, and more than half wanted an Independent on the presidential ballot in 1996.

The future looks like a threesome, provided we keep plugging away at the present. Ideally, multiple parties will compete to decide policies, allowing new ideas to get past the gate and keeping the Republicans and Democrats on their toes.

It would be like the break-up of Ma Bell — setting free-market forces loose in Congress to improve the service. It might at least encourage this country to reexamine its sacred cows and experiment with governmental authority. Who's to say that privatizing sidewalks or mining Jupiter's rings are bad ideas?

At the very worst, the state could decline under lousy leadership, corruption, and bankruptcy. Or we could remain as we are, declining under lousy leadership, corruption and bankruptcy — plus the regret of knowing apathy allowed it to happen.

Falling back on the usual candidates is worse than not voting at all. Calculate the number of Congressmen who aren't either Republican or Democrat (one), and consider what representation means. Then, if you can't overcome apathy, avenge it: Vote Independent in the next election. For kicks.

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