



A new London Irish Society has been set up by expatriate Gaels with the twin aims of assisting young Irish arrivals in England and eventually providing this country's economy with a shot in the arm. Mark Piggott and Martin McNamara report.

"We're not political." John Wallace, founder member of the London Irish Society, tells us as we meet and sit down in a crowded pub within the city's square mile. We haven't actually asked about the society's politics, but he feels it necessary to tell us from the outset: "We belong to what is probably the least political, least Republican generation of Irish people there has ever been."

The London Irish Society was founded early last year by a group of young professional Irish people living in the capital. Their aims are two-fold: to help the young Irish who are coming to England in their thousands; and more ambitiously they see themselves as being in a position where they can help the Irish economy.

The LIS is also a social organisation. Their first event, a ball at the Hilton Hotel last October, was primarily to raise money for the Irish Centre in Camden, but it also provided the opportunity for London's young successful Irish sophisticates to come out in their best frocks and suits and have an occasion which was their very own.

The evening was a success, nearly one thousand people paid £25 each to dine, dance and drink Black Velvet. £5,000 was raised, and the organisers are planning further events. An afternoon of mulled wine and mince pies at the Irish Centre earlier this month attracted 400 people. James Garvey, engineer and one of the founders of the Society believes they have tapped strong feelings that exist in the Irish community in London. "People were always saying they'd love to do something to help Ireland but they've never seen how they could.

The Society is saying well come to us and we'll tell you what you can do.”

Garvey explains just how the Society intends helping the home economy. “There's probably at least one Irishman in all the major city institutions. Being Irish, you get to know the top men in the company and hopefully we can attract people into investing in Dublin.” John Wallace, one of the Irishmen working in the City, takes up the point. “The new technology brought in by the Big Bang means that you don't have to work in any one place. There is no reason why our companies couldn't operate from Dublin.” The founder members see the LIS as an attempt to stop the drain of talent from Ireland. Wallace explains: “The first thing you do when you get your education, you stick it in your pocket and jump on the plane to England.” Mary McDonald, another member of the central committee and an architect, explains her own position. “The people I went to university with, out of a class of thirty, only two found jobs in Ireland.”

It is a situation that angers many of the people who were forced to leave. “The people that come to London, if you talk to them, it is very rare that you'll find one who will admit that they would not rather be back in Dublin than over here,” maintains Mary McDonald. “We want to help bring about a change in Ireland's economy that would allow Irish people to be able to work at their profession and stay in their own country.”

The Society have several projects under consideration. Their work in the City they see as a backup to the efforts being made by the Irish government and the business community that already exists in Dublin in attracting the major companies. Wallace explains how he views their role.

“If you are developing any business nowadays it has to be marketed somewhere. Because Dublin is where it is geographically it will be seen as a satellite of the London financial centre, so the first place to market it is in the City of London. That is where our involvement, when it comes about properly, will be created.”

The Society is still in its formative stage of development. “At the moment we are little more than a catering committee,” says Garvey. “The proof of the pudding will be in five years time.” As well as organising further balls they are working on a number of other projects: a barbecue in the summer, a trade fair in Hammersmith in May, and a quarterly magazine. Membership costs £15 per annum and is growing.

Observers have been quick to dismiss the London Irish Society as a social organisation for charitable yuppies; as the creation of an upper class among the Irish immigrants in London. It is an image that its organisers want to dispel. “We are some of the lucky ones, our education is our passport,” says Mary McDonald. “If we wanted to go swanning around, living it up at parties we could. We are trying to do something positive for the place we left.”

The London Irish Society are the self appointed ambassadors of the Irish in Britain. They see themselves as changing the attitude of people to Ireland and the Irish and are confident in their ability to help move Ireland into a new era. “In a way we do see ourselves as ambassadors,” says Garvey. “If the companies that employ us are happy with our performance then why not go to Ireland?”

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