



ASK THE POWERFUL FIVE QUESTIONS

What power have you got?
Where did you get it from?
In whose interests do you exercise it?
To whom are you accountable?
How can we get rid of you?

Only democracy gives us that right. That is why no-one with power likes democracy and that is why every generation must struggle to win it and keep it; including you and me, here and now.

Tony Benn 2005

WORDS MATTER, They Govern Our Thinking

One of the most annoying features during Irish elections is the habit of political representatives referring to the seat to which they are elected by the voters as "my seat" - "I won *my* seat", "I lost *my* seat" and so on in a revealing line of thought.

And then there is the media reinforcing the same line of thought with constant referrals to "*his/her* seat" and "*your* seat" and others in the same fallacy.

The *possessive* is presumptuous in a democracy - elected representatives do not own, nor have they any property rights whatsoever, in the seats to which voters elect them. As a rhetorical device, of course, it serves the unjustified purpose of creating a mental barrier to entry – potential challengers are seen as challenging someone's claim on a seat.

The late Labour Parliamentarian, Tony Benn MP, understood, appreciated and respected democracy: That "we can remove without bloodshed the people who govern us."

In his great speech to the House of Commons in 1991, as the Maastricht Treaty was coming to the fore, he stated the position on who 'owned' the seat to which he was elected by the voters of Chesterfield.

While a critic and opponent of the European Project, he made the point this way: "Even if I agree with everything that is proposed, I cannot hand away the **powers lent to me by the people** of Chesterfield, I just could not do it. It would be theft of public rights."

Mr Benn knew what democracy meant and his position as an elected representative in it and who held the rights to the seat.

We could do with that kind of thinking in Ireland. Small as the change might seem, it would bring a different attitude which would have other benefits too. If nothing else, it would ensure clarity about the fact that a Dail seat 'belongs' to its electorate.

This is important in practice as the confusion is not a matter of just playing with words as words matter. Lest it be thought that this is just about words, let's note the points made by John Maynard Keynes and Benjamin Lee Whorf, which cover both 'directions', so to speak, about words and language:

"Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about."

- Whorf -

"Confusion of thought and feeling leads to confusion of speech."

- Keynes -

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