

Irish power in Chicago politics and business — myth or not, it has an impact

By Shia Kapos
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Power in Illinois is all about the green, according to outgoing Cook County Board President Todd Stroger.

Not money. Emerald Isle green.

"If you break down our state and you look at who's the governor, who's the speaker of the House, who's the Senate president, who's the mayor of the city of Chicago, who's the water reclamation district president, who's the chairman of finance for the city and who's the chairman for finance for the county, you'll find that they're all Irish males," Mr. Stroger said while campaigning this winter.

True enough. But in this day and age, is it really credible to say an Irish machine runs Chicago?

Yes, and "it's frustrating," Mr. Stroger says. During his campaign he also complained that the Chicago Federation of Labor, which declined to endorse him, would not "turn their back on an Irish-American."

Mr. Stroger's references to Irish clout and connectedness — what some call a mafia-like "Murphyia" — are the stuff of legend in Chicago, where Irish Mayor Richard J. Daley perfected the Democratic Machine and judges use their grandparents' Irish names on ballots.

Many say those notions are outdated. But they dyed the Chicago River green again this week, in the city's most famous display of Irish affinity. And there's no denying that Irish names like McKenna, Madigan and Gannon appear in the upper reaches of government, labor and business organizations in greater numbers than their 10% share of the local population would seem to warrant.

The perception that one ethnic group has an inside track to power and influence can discourage the ambitious and drive local talent to seek their fortunes elsewhere. And favoritism is at the root of the culture of corruption that has disgraced Illinois and wrecked its finances.

The ethnic background of the city's politicians and permit-issuers wasn't lost on Donald Trump when he rolled into town. Colm O'Callaghan credits his Irish pedigree for breaking the ice during his interview with Mr. Trump, who is not Irish.

"He said, 'The fact that you're Irish works in Chicago,' " says Mr. O'Callaghan, 46, vice-president and managing director at Trump International Hotel & Tower. "I don't know if it helped me get the job. I'd like to think it was on the strength of my experience."

Patrick Duggan, 34, owns the aptly named Hibernian Direct LLC (Latin for "one who comes from Ireland"), a Chicago-based construction company. He credits his Irish connection with landing a \$500,000 contract with London-based Barclays Capital, which took over the Lehman Bros. building at 190 S. LaSalle St.



Patrick Duggan, owner of contractors Hibernian Direct, says being Irish may not be a leg up, "but it's a leg in. I think it brings down a barrier in this industry." Photo: Erik Unger

Barclays "has a lot of Irish employees" in Chicago, he says. "I got introduced through a mutual acquaintance. The guy doing the interview had been to Ireland many times, and his parents were from the same location as mine — Limerick. It helped develop a relationship that's stayed strong since.

"I wouldn't say being Irish is a leg up, but it's a leg in," he adds. "I think it brings down a barrier in this industry."

Some say the Irish have long had an upper hand as English speakers landing in the United States. They were the first hired by the police and fire departments, then took control of political jobs.

"That being said, just as the face of Chicago has changed, so has the makeup of its politicians," says state Rep. John Fritchey, D-Chicago.

A few years ago, he wrote a law that prevents candidates from changing their names just to appear more Irish on a ballot. That didn't stop quips like "Barack O'Bama," but "Chicago voters are more willing than ever to look beyond surnames and look instead at the substance of people running," says Mr. Fritchey, 46, who is not Irish.

A DIVERSE WORLD

Edward Burke, 66, the powerful alderman of the city's 14th Ward, has never been one to hide his Irish roots but says, with changing times, Irish pride is becoming more tempered. "Perhaps there's a tinge of

embarrassment" about touting one's ethnic background, he says, as constituencies become more diverse.

' The sense of overcoming discrimination and supporting each other as an ethnic group is gone.'

— Dick Simpson, Chicago history expert

Public-works projects, though, often bear names like Walsh, Kenny, McHugh, McDonough and O'Neil. (When it's time for a building to go, look for Heneghan Wrecking Co. for demolition and Flood Bros. for disposal.)

But not everyone admits to familiarity breeding success.

"Most folks who have businesses or law firms can't afford to be favoring an ethnicity. That would ruin their business," says John Cooney, 54, a fifth-generation Chicago Irishman and partner in Cooney & Conway law firm. "If you only hired people from your neighborhood or from your ethnicity, you would cut out most of the world."

CME Group Inc.'s chairman, Terrence Duffy, 51, agrees. "It's about business," he says.

Mr. Duffy and Charles Carey, vice-chairman of CME and former head of the Chicago Board of Trade, were traders in the hog pits in the 1980s before their companies merged.

"We both are of Irish descent, but our friendship started from a deep appreciation for business," Mr. Duffy says.

Michael O'Halleran, 59, remembers looking around the boardroom table at the lieutenants assembled by CEO Patrick Ryan at Aon Corp. in the 1980s.

"There's no doubt there was a definite advantage to being Irish; a good percentage of the board was," says Mr. O'Halleran, executive chairman and founder of Aon Benfield, the reinsurance arm of the Chicago-based insurance broker.

But, he adds, "whether it's in boardrooms of politics or business, the reality in this city is that the Irish are well-represented."

Today, Aon's board includes Andy McKenna — Mr. Ryan's Irish friend — but also John Rogers, founder of Ariel Investments LLC, the largest minority-run mutual fund in the country.

Mr. O'Halleran also heads World Business Chicago, an economic development organization, with fellow Irishman Mayor Richard M. Daley. "There are a lot of Irish, but we're not the majority," Mr. O'Halleran says.

Perhaps not, but seven of that group's 23 board members have Irish surnames.

Garrett Sheridan immigrated to Chicago from Dublin 15 years ago and helped found the Ireland Network, a professional networking group. But he made equally important connections a few years later when he became a member of the Economic Club (populated by Farrells, Ryans and O'Connors, and run by the Irish Grace Barry, who points out that "our present chair is African-American").

His membership "hasn't been a direct source of work, but it's helped me build a reputation," says Mr. Sheridan, 38, managing partner of Chicago-based Axiom Consulting Partners.

Patrick Collins, the former federal prosecutor who led the case against fellow Irishman and former Gov. George Ryan, says the Irish presence in Illinois, especially in law and politics, is obvious.

"It's hard to argue, at least from an empirical standpoint, that the Irish have not acquired their fair share of power positions in this state," says Mr. Collins, 45.

Indeed, he occasionally takes a call from a potential client specifically requesting legal counsel from an Irishman. "But every year that goes by, ethnicity does become, and should be, less and less significant," he adds.

Circuit Court Judge John Griffin says he's "certainly benefited from great Irish support" and points to the large number of Irish elected over the years — some using their grandparents' Irish names on ballots to woo voters.

So are the Irish-in-power to blame for the state's ills?

That, Mr. Griffin says, would be "overgeneralizing." Besides, he says, along with a "Madigan, Quinn and Hynes, there was a Blagojevich, too."

WEAKENED GRIP

Dick Simpson, head of the political science department at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a noted Chicago history expert, says the seeming Irish grip on government isn't what it used to be.

"It's weakened today. There's still a Mayor Daley, but he's no longer the party boss. There's a party chairman. You no longer have an Irish member heading the county board," he says.

The business world, he adds, never was controlled by Irish, but by WASPs: "That's become more diverse, too."

And, he says, the Irish no longer have outsider status to bond them.

"They come up through the same systems, go to the same schools, work their way up by achievement in ways that don't have to do with ethnicity," he says.

Mary Dempsey, commissioner of the Chicago Public Library, calls Irish clannishness a myth.

"I don't think it's there. We were proud of our Irish heritage but just as proud to be American and to be Catholic," she says of her upbringing in the western suburbs.

Ms. Dempsey, 56, is married to personal-injury attorney Philip Corboy, who also is Irish. She is the first in her family to work in government and did not know Mr. Daley before she was hired.

The non-Irish, though, still see things differently.

"It doesn't matter if there's a secret organization of Irish CEOs in power," says Douglas Bukowski, a historian and observer of Chicago's Irish who has written about his Polish father's career as a firefighter when Irish captains ruled. "What matters is that Chicago's Irish community believes it, as do many Chicagoans who have no particular affection for the color green."

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