Democracy and local government reform in Britain 1996-2010 – Some lessons for implementing putting people first?

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INTRODUCTION

The package of proposals contained in *Putting People First* document, the Report of the Local Electoral Area Boundary Committee and the Final Report of the Local Government/Local Development Alignment Steering Group, taken in conjunction with the introduction of the Residential Property Tax and the incorporation of enterprise development bodies in local government represent the most significant set of local government reforms articulated by an Irish government since the introduction of the city/county manager system. In particular the focus on making local public policy making more democratic and accountable is particularly noteworthy. The implementation of these policy initiatives has now commenced with the publication of the Local Government Bill, 2013.

Ireland is not unusual in seeking to radically reform the operation of the state at local level. Andrews and Boyne (2012, 297-298) note that policy makers across the world continue to debate the merits of alternative local government structures in terms of their consequences for local service costs and performance. In recent years several countries have enacted or considered reorganizations of local government on the grounds of efficiency. Examples include Denmark where the number of local government units was reduced from 270 to 98 in 2007, and there is further ongoing discussion about another reduction. Similarly, in Australia and Canada, debates have long raged about the amalgamation of local governments (Vojnovic 2000; King *et al.* 2004, Dollery *et al.* 2009). At the same time, it seems likely that the current era of fiscal austerity will increase the pressure on governments to reform and/or reorganize local government.

This article proposes that the implementation Irish local government reform programme should take heed of previous and similar reform processes in order for the changes it proposes to be embedded and successful (Wollman 2008). In additions it suggests that the reforms may have very significant implications for planners, the planning process and the planning system. This is particularly the case in relation to the proposals that seek to improve the rather limited democratic

legitimacy of Irish local government. The article itself is divided into three parts. The first provides a rationale for Britain as a comparator and the choice of the 1996-2010 period, as well as a brief introduction to the terms used in the article. This is followed by an examination of the British case and an analysis of the evidence to date on the implications that arose for the planning process and planning system in Britain. The final part of the article provides an overview of the pertinent lessons arising from these reform processes.

RATIONALE FOR THE PERIOD OF ANALYSIS CHOSEN

The article examines what lessons Irish public policy-makers can learn from the systematic reform of local government undertaken in Britain between 1996 and 2010. With regard to the period of analysis, 1996 to 2010 is highlighted because the period witnessed a co-ordinated and coherent approach to the reform of the local state in Britain. This includes the formulation of New Labour's election manifesto, the enactment of a number of very significant pieces of legislation, the McIntosh Commission on Scottish Local Government (1999), the Sunderland Commission on Local Government Electoral Arrangements in Wales (2002), and finally the culmination of the work of the Lyons Enquiry into Local Government (2007). The article deliberately omits the more recent initiatives launched by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government, for example the announcement of the Localism Bill, the abolition of the Audit Commission and the arrival of the 'Big Society' agenda, because it is too early to assess the impact of such measures.[1]

DEMOCRACY AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM

It is unusual in Irish public policy discourse to meaningfully engage with democracy (Kirby and Murphy 2009, Ó Broin and Murphy 2013). Recent efforts have been limited and lacked any robust engagement with the complex and competing notions of democracy. The work of the Task Force on Active Citizenship is just one example of this trend (Cronin 2009). In this context the language and intent of *Putting People First* is welcome (Government of Ireland 2012, 1). For the purposes of this article

[1] Lowndes and Pratchett (2012, 22) suggest that the Conservative-Liberal Democrat reforms do "show traces of an ideological commitment to localism and a new understanding of local self-government". In addition, they note that there is "an ideological agenda which has the potential to deliver a radically different form of local governance" (ibid.). However, the reform process is far from coherent and the potential for radical change is heavily constrained by a number of factors, including:

The conflicting ideologies of both parties, e.g. one-nation Conservatism, new right post-Thatcherism and a distinctive blend of liberalism and community politics;

The political expediency of budget cuts aimed at changing Britain's economic position before the 2015 General Election. This expediency promotes a short-termism that is not necessarily compatible with the publicly stated longer term goals of local self-government.

the terms 'democracy' and 'democratization' are employed in fairly straightforward manner. Rather than entering into sophisticated and theoretical analysis of democracy and processes of democratization, it is suggested that it is more helpful to indicate why local democracy matters and then focus on the elements that are widely regarded as being the "necessary components of a healthy local democracy" (Leach and Percy-Smith 2001, 101).

The argument for democracy has "always involved a mixture of the prudential and the ideal" (Phillips 1996, 20). For the purposes of this article, the focus is primarily on the 'prudential' or instrumental justifications for democracy, i.e. democracy as a safety net. Part of the argument is that the alternatives are just too unpalatable. Quite simply there is too much room for either tyranny or corruption if decisions are left in the hands of a non-accountable elite. Furthermore, and contrary to Plato's proposition that the "art of good government is not comparable to the art of captaining a ship" (*ibid.*), it is argued that while citizens want to see experts in charge of navigating oil tankers across the oceans or designing the next jumbo jet, they don't consider politics to be purely a matter of technical expertise.[2] Allowing experts to make decisions on their behalf only makes sense; when (a) the matters to be addressed can be regarded as questions of 'objective' truth; (b) "society has established convincing mechanisms for identifying the appropriate experts; and (c) when those selected to make decisions can be trusted to set their own special interests aside" (Phillips 1996, 20-21). If citizens are in any way sceptical about these conditions, democracy is the safer option. Part of the background to the development of democracy is a greater tolerance for disagreement and difference, distaste for final truths about what is best for society, and a reluctance to impose convictions on others. In the absence of clear and agreed principles for identifying the 'right' decisions or the 'right' deciders, citizens have to fall back on what they, as citizens, choose. This may result in ill-considered or inconsistent policies. It will probably, if not definitely, produce policies that some of the citizens detest. However, it is still safer than any non-democratic alternative.

The first part of the argument for democracy is based on the difficulties of knowing which policies are right. It is supported by the second justification, which stresses the inevitable conflict of interests in complex societies. In these societies, such as post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, there is rarely a transparently obvious common interest, or at least one that stands up to robust scrutiny. Even the most altruistic and public-minded of citizens tend to view the world through their own experiences and interests. The only real protection against this is the equal representation of all (Kirby and Murphy 2011, 215-215). As Phillips states, "when experts are suspect

[2] This has particular resonance in the Irish local government system due to the role and function of city/county manager, senior administrators and technical experts in the policy formulation and decision-making processes.

and interests collide, decisions have to be kept accountable through some process of democratic control" (1996, 21).

Consequently, this article focuses on the elements that are widely regarded as being the "necessary components of a healthy local democracy" (Leach and Percy-Smith 2001, 101). These include: (a) responsiveness to, and engagement with, citizens; (b) opportunities for citizen participation; (c) clear roles and responsibilities for elected representatives including representation of their communities; and (d) effective mechanisms for accountability (*ibid.*).

DEMOCRACY AND THE PLANNING PROCESS

The role of democracy in the planning process has often been a matter of debate. Many consider that the housing and other developmental ills that arose in the recent economic boom in Ireland were a result of an excessive reliance on democracy and on the decisions of elected Councillors with regard to the zoning of land, the making of decisions to grant permission for dubious developments and other matters. For those persuaded to this viewpoint all would be well if rational decisions were taken by technical experts and if political considerations were eliminated from the process. Indeed this viewpoint seems to be reflected in the announced intention of the Government to remove some of the powers of Elected Members with regard to planning decisions and the establishment of a central Planning Regulator as recommended by the Mahon Tribunal. While acknowledging the excesses of the Celtic Tiger era, however, others are reluctant to hand all of the control for making decisions about the kind of places in which we want to live and work to unelected experts whose views on what constitutes the good life or a good place is likely to be just as biased as that of any lay person or their representatives. The finding of a balance, therefore, between the role of the elected representative and the expert, between the democratically expressed views of the people and the knowledge and understanding of the professional is a matter that should be considered when any reform of local government and its systems is being contemplated. The interface between democracy and expertise is not a matter to be treated lightly.

DEMOCRACY AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IN BRITAIN 1996-2010

The role of elected local government in Britain has changed dramatically over the past 34 years. Since 1979 its role as a direct service provider has "declined markedly" (Wilson 2005, 155). Partnerships at local level have increased. Elected local councils

now "share the turf" with a wide range of other public agencies and quasi-public agencies, for example health authorities, police authorities, and learning and skills councils (ibid.). The once dominant position of elected local government has been challenged by these new agencies and the increased involvement of voluntary sector organisations and private sector groups in service delivery. The philosopher Michael Oakeshott used to consider local government a subject of "unimaginable dreariness" (Bulpitt 1989, 57). Since 1997 it has become high profile, even exciting.

The Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major saw local government at a low ebb. Gerry Stoker (1999, 1) provides a good summary of the situation:

What happened to British local government during the period of Conservative government from 1979 to 1997 was in many respects a brutal illustration of power politics. The funding system was reformed to provide central government with a considerable (and probably unprecedented) level of control over spending. Various functions and responsibilities were stripped away from local authorities or organised in a way that obliged local authorities to work in partnership with other public and private agencies in the carrying out of functions.

The election of the Blair government in May 1997 precipitated an intense debate about local government in Britain. Furthermore there was a very distinct focus on urban government. Many academics and policymakers contended that local government had failed to adapt itself to the challenges of the late 20th century. Public indifference, voter apathy and declining trust in the institutions of representative government justified "urgent measures to reform the ways in which councils connected with their communities" (Rao 2000, 1). The need for renewal was comprehensive, and local government provided a useful point of entry for the "democratisation of democracy" (ibid.).

At the same time, New Labour was also committed to rebuilding Britain's cities. As Hill notes, "by the 1990s urban policy seemed to have lost its way" (2000, 2). It was widely criticised as a "patchwork quilt" of different projects and approaches rather than a coherent and sustained strategy (ibid.). The election of the Blair government, with its philosophy and reforms of local governance driving an apparently radical agenda was seen as bringing a new focus. Foremost among its aims was to narrow the gap between the most deprived urban areas and the rest of the country, tackling the squalor and misery of the worst housing estates and inner-city areas and giving people hope through training and education.

It is this combination of (a) a commitment to revitalising local democracy, (for example the New Labour election manifesto stated, "local decision-making should be less constrained by central government, and also more accountable to local people" (cited by Wilson 2005, 156)), and (b) a willingness to rebuild Britain's cities, that makes the reforms of the period so interesting.

VISION OF URBAN RENAISSANCE

In driving this new urban agenda, the Labour government established an Urban Task Force to advise it. The Task Force's report, Towards an urban renaissance (1999) and the subsequent White Paper, Our Towns and Cities – The Future: delivering an urban renaissance, both called for "a move back to the city" (Lees 2003, 61). Both documents proved to be seminal, and while not without their critics, greatly influenced government thinking on cities, and in particular, their argument that competitiveness, social cohesion and effective urban governance were bound together (Boddy and Parkinson 2004, 407-409; Harding 2005, 62-77). For the new Labour government, the way to regenerate Britain's cities was by recourse to social inclusion measures, neighbourhood renewal and community involvement:

> *"Over the past two decades the gap between these worst estates and the rest of the county has grown. It shames us as a nation, it wastes lives and we all have to pay the costs of dependency and social division"* (Blair 1998, 1).

REVITALISING LOCAL DEMOCRACY

With regard to revitalising local democracy, there was much that was familiar in the 1998 White Paper, *Modern local government: In touch with the people*. While proposals for enhancing public participation through local forums and through changes in electoral procedures had an element of novelty about them, other parts of the package, in particular the transformation of decision-making structures through the creation of separate local executives or elected mayors, was already part of the established discourse of local government reform.

DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

'Democratic renewal' was an early catch phrase of New Labour's programme for local government. As an aspiration it commands wide assent, if only by virtue of its ambiguity. It can be interpreted more or less as one wishes. In fact, at least three distinct meanings were discernible in the Blair government's use of the term.

First, it was used to describe a set of practical responses to clearly identifiable problems, such as low levels of electoral turnout. To deal with such problems, the government proposed changes to election procedures and practices, such as electoral registration processes. At this level, the changes proposed amounted to little more than attempts to improve the existing system. The problems were not attributed to any deep-seated malaise, but rather to the inflexibility and inconvenience of existing arrangements. The timing and frequency of elections and the accessibility of the polling stations were seen as key issues. Making voting easier, for example by holding elections at weekends, providing for rolling registration and placing polling booths in shops or railway stations, should improve turnout it was thought.

Second, the term 'democratic renewal' reflected the presence of deeper failings in the practice of local democracy. Loss of faith in the institutions of modern government and declining trust in the people who run them, rather than the inadequacies of the particular mechanisms, were the real causes of public indifference and lack of involvement. Democratic renewal in this sense did not refer to failures of local government as such, but to inherent weaknesses in the culture of democracy. The diagnosis was clear enough. What was less clear was what measures could be proposed to remedy such deficiencies.

Third, the term 'democratic renewal' was used to describe a new type of political system in which "different components of representative, deliberative and direct democracy are combined to create a more open, participative and responsive polity at the local level" (Pratchett 1999, 2). The intention was to create a new democracy by involving people in a wide variety of ways alongside the existing structure of elective representation. Revitalising local democracy became a feasible ambition if steps were taken to involve local people in decision making, perhaps through citizens' juries or focus groups. An element of direct democracy was introduced through more widespread use of referenda. Taken together, more responsive and attentive local councillors, widespread use of consultative forums and placing key issues directly to popular vote promised a reinvigoration of local political life. The government's agenda for 'democratic renewal' sought to promote such initiatives.

NEW POLITICAL STRUCTURES

Rao contends that "central to the modernisation project of local and urban government under the Labour government, was the concept of 'community leadership'"(2000, 131). The concept had been developed during the party's long years of opposition and is based on the premise that, alongside a better framework

for regulating conduct, appropriate management structures are crucial if councils are to become more responsive to their local communities and "excite the interest and enthusiasm of local people" (*ibid.*). Community leadership is at the heart of the role of modern local government. Councils are the organisations best placed to take a comprehensive overview of the needs and priorities of their local areas and communities and lead the work to meet those needs and priorities in the round (DETR 1998, 79).

This notion of local governments playing such a central role implied new decision-making structures to create a "clear and well known focus for local leadership" (*ibid.*). Decision makers had to become visible and their processes transparent. Local people should know who takes decisions, who to hold to account and who to complain to when things go wrong. Labour had "given local government a central place in its agenda to modernise British institutions" (Rao 2000, 131).

ENHANCING PARTICIPATION

Politics reflects the consensus, divisions and expectations of democratic society. At local level people express their views and demands through voting, standing for election and working towards their goals through parties, interest groups and protest. Between 1979 and 1997, however, local politics had become more complex as the Thatcher and Major governments had devolved decisions to a variety of unelected agencies. These agencies delivered services, for example the National Health Service Trusts, managed services delivered by others, for example the Training and Enterprise Councils, and were used to emphasise partnership in problem solving, for example by the establishment of Urban Regeneration Corporations. What characterised these agencies was that they were appointed, rather than elected, were funded wholly or substantially from central government and had very specific remits and terms of reference.

Getting people involved in decision making was a central tenet of the New Labour agenda. In this context, citizens, as participants, were to be involved as stakeholders and contributors, not as a passive audience.

Local councils exist to serve and speak up for local people. They can only do that properly if they keep in touch with local people and local organisations. Democratic elections are the bedrock on which the whole system is built…… but the ballot is only part of the story. It is therefore imperative that councils keep in touch with local views between elections (Labour Party 1995, 13).

An early proposal for broadening democratic input into decision making was the use of citizens' juries. These are a form of deliberative democracy, in which decision making grows out of more open discussion, reflecting on the opinions of others and pursuing reasoned arguments. Through this consultative mechanism, a sample of local people form a panel of around 20-25 members, which cross-examines, witnesses, formulates views and makes recommendations (Coote and Lenaghan 1997).

Other mechanisms included the use of referenda, generally regarded as very un-British, focus groups, standing citizens' panels, deliberative opinion polls, consensus conferencing and so on. The interesting aspect of this was that these new methodologies had been tested by many local authorities during the 1990s and so weren't regarded as particularly threatening. In addition to new ways of enhancing participation, electoral reform became a major topic of discussion. Since the election of the Labour government, the McIntosh (1999) and Sunderland (2002) Commissions established to examine local government electoral systems in Scotland and Wales had recommended the adoptions of proportional representation with a single transferable vote.

DEVELOPING NEW FORMS OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

The British, and to a significantly more limited extent, the Irish, systems of local government is essentially 'government by committee'. Councils make decisions through their committees, to whom they delegate their powers. All decisions originate as committee decisions and all councillors are, in theory, able to participate in decision making. There were three widespread criticisms of the committee system:

(a) It was slow, cumbersome and an indecisive way of making decisions;
(b) It represented an institutionalised disincentive to delegate decisions to officials;
(c) There was a propensity to attend to detail at the expense of policy.

TOWARDS GREATER REPRESENTATIVENESS

A key aim of the Labour government was to remove barriers to local government service for women and members of underrepresented groups. It was assumed that changes in internal management – "concentrating power in an executive and developing a scrutiny role for the remaining councils" – would encourage different types of people to "enter and exit council service" (Rao 2000, 166).

A NEW POLITICAL EXECUTIVE

The government aimed to change the system in a number of ways. Three distinct proposals were offered:

(a) A cabinet with a leader;
(b) A directly elected mayor with a cabinet;
(c) A directly elected mayor and council manager.

Councils were allowed to decide the system they wanted. In addition they were allowed to run referenda to allow the people decide which system they wanted for their council. Directly elected mayors could be seen as a cornerstone of Labour's plan for local government. He/she would provide a clear and accountable 'voice' for the local area.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PLANNING PROCESS, THE PLANNING SYSTEM AND GOVERNANCE

Allmendinger *et al.* (2005) and Marshall (2009) detail a number of distinct, though related, changes that have relevance for the planning process which arose from the reform approach in Britain:

(a) Local governing transformations, in particular the importance attached to community strategies and a linked rise in community planning;
(b) The consolidation of a regional tier in the planning hierarchy in England;
(c) A very significant change in the role and approach of elected councillors;
(d) Increased public participation;
(e) The continued marketization of planning, i.e. dominance of discourse of competitiveness and re-orientation of existing economic governance. Ed Balls, then the Chief Economic Adviser to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, notes that planning, particularly regional planning, is about "strengthening the essential building blocks of growth" and "exploiting the indigenous strengths in each region and city" (Allmendinger et al. 2005, 366).

In terms of their implications for planners, three dynamics can be identified:

(a) Increased participation by elected councillors, in their role as community leaders, communities and citizens (Stewart 2003, 18) in increasingly complex inter-agency planning processes (Tewdwr-Jones et al. 2006) often leading to enhanced scrutiny of activities and performance (Allmendinger et al. 2003, 764);

(b) The "re-emergence of the regional level of governance and planning" (Tewdwr-Jones 2012, 125);
(c) The focus of future planning activities on economic competitiveness and the "building of regional institutional capacity" (Amin 1999).

Allmendinger *et al.* (2003, 765-766) note these dynamics have major implications for "what it means to be a planner in such a modernizing local government environment". They note that it "is widely accepted that there has been a broad change in the role and functions of professionals", including planners (*ibid.*). Of particular interest in the Irish context is the very changed nature of the relationship between elected councillors and planners. For example, prior to 2002, complaints by professional staff against elected councillors were investigated internally, either by the Chief Executive or the council's Monitoring Officer. Since 2002, however, each council is required to have a code of conduct for elected councillors that they are obliged to sign. Allegations of misconduct are investigated independently and whistle blowing is encouraged (Allmendinger *et al.* 2003, 767). In the first year of operation in England, the Standards Board received over 2000 complaints.

THE IRISH AND UK LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND PLANNING SYSTEMS

Before considering the implications of the British experience for Ireland, it must be acknowledged that there are considerable differences between the two systems both with regard to planning and the general activities of the Councils. In the first instance, the structure of Irish Local Government with its Manager (to be re-designated as a CEO) who has statutory authority independent of the elected members and who has a right to make many executive decisions on behalf of the Council is considerably different from the British system in which the role of the Chief Executive is more under the control of the elected members. While a re-balancing of this relationship has been flagged in the Programme for Government and in Putting People First, the recently published Bill sees the role of the Manager largely unaltered. Secondly, while the relationship between the Local Authority and other bodies in Ireland is certainly as complex as in the British experience, the stated aim of the Irish reform agenda is to strengthen rather than dilute the role of the Local Authority.

Both of these differences have implications for the way in which planning might be impacted by the reform agenda in Ireland.

LESSONS AND CHALLENGES FOR IRISH PUBLIC POLICY MAKERS

In many countries traditional approaches to local government are being transformed (Pierre 2011). Long established practices and procedures are being questioned and "innovations in democratic and managerial practice now proliferate" (Hambleton 2003, 147). Ireland is not unusual in attempting to address the democratic deficit that has developed in the existing public policy process (Keogan 2003). For the majority of European liberal democracies, public involvement in the detail of public policy decision-making has been the exception rather than the rule. The central "communicative bridge" between the state and the individual has been a mixture of opinion poll and public meeting (Khan 1999, 147). These have been primarily used as *ad-hoc* measures to assess levels of public dissatisfaction.

In this context, and having examined the route followed by Britain, this article argues that while the Irish reform package has much to recommend it from the perspective of democratising Irish local government, for example addressing voting inequalities, introducing a state-wide municipal tier of government, introducing the Local Community Development Committees, taking steps to address the Manager-Councillor power imbalance[3] and introducing directly-elected mayors, these are tentative steps only. There is (a) still a great deal to do to develop appropriate processes of democratization and participation, and (b) the likelihood that very significant changes will arise in the relationship between management, professionals and elected councillors which changes must be properly managed if they are not to give rise to dysfunctional outcomes.

It should be noted that the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government is aware of the issue of the relationship between the citizen and Local Government. While it might be argued that the scale of representative government is being reduced, there does seem to be an intention to increase citizen participation. Indeed, the Minister has established a Working Group to specifically examine this issue and to recommend ways in which the citizen can be more engaged in the decisions that directly affect their lives.

DEMOCRATISATION AND PARTICIPATION

It is not suggested that the British experience is perfect or even that it is one that should be emulated. For example, there are many reservations regarding the Labour government's belief that reducing the barriers to participation at elections and more

[3] The position of Manager will be replaced by a very different position of Chief Executive and that elected councillors may have a veto over their appointment.

direct engagement would encourage greater involvement. Could a revised local politics really inculcate the civic virtues on such a scale as to reverse the adverse cultural changes of the past decades? To expect it to do so may be to place an unrealistic burden on the otherwise sensible steps taken to improve the politics of local government; it is to confuse modest improvements in turnout with actual shifts in beliefs, motivations and outlook on political life. Furthermore, Copus cogently details the flaws in the British efforts at establishing mayoral government, while still concluding that they offer a real attempt to provide "local leadership and local choice" (2006, 214). Hope and Wanduragala (2010, 8-9) conclude that a mayor-led more place-based approach has proved successful in many areas in England that have adopted the model of directly-elected mayor. In a similar vein Quinliven (2008) notes that a previous attempt to introduce directly-elected mayors, while quite ambiguous, was a meaningful contribution to improving democratic accountability.

When the Irish reform proposals are reviewed with regard to the elements that are widely regarded as being the "necessary components of a healthy local democracy", i.e. (a) responsiveness to, and engagement with, citizens; (b) opportunities for citizen participation; (c) clear roles and responsibilities for elected representatives including representation of their communities; and (d) effective mechanisms for accountability, it may appear that they address the key issues at least in the intentions that are expressed. However it is worth recalling the Local Government Act, 2001. It also aimed to:

(a) Enhance, in an appreciable way, the role of councillors, particularly in the area of civic leadership;
(b) Embed a culture of citizen participation.

These didn't materialise for a variety of reasons but a critical failure was the ambiguity contained in the establishing legislation and accompanying policy documentation (Forde 2004, 2005 and Callanan 2005). In relation to the role of councillors, this remains a very contested area of debate and despite the establishment of Strategic Policy Committees, City/County Development Boards and community fora, Ireland has been very poor at setting up complementary forms of participation (Quinn 2007). Local social dialogue has been sustained but it is argued that this is more a reflection of the currently mothballed national partnership mechanism than an embedded process (Ó Broin 2013).

Sean O'Riordáin has carried out a review of a number of community-based planning processes which have been implemented throughout Ireland. These

processes include the Balhyhoura ADOPT model, the IAP model developed by Tipperary Institute and the Mayo Community Futures project. O'Riordáin (2011, 4) identifies five factors that are required for such processes to be successful –

- Local community capacity (knowledge, understanding and skills to engage in socio-economic planning and deliver agreed projects).
- Legal umbrella structure within the local community and network of their representatives at county/sub-county (district) level.
- Local authority willingness to engage appropriately with the socio-economic planning.
- The level of trust among community leaders for engaging with the public sector.
- External facilitation is needed to support the socio-economic planning process at community level (most of which may be delivered by existing staff in local authorities and local development companies).

It will be noted that the willingness of the Local Authority to engage in such processes is a key element as is the trust between community leaders and public bodies. The philosophy expressed in *Putting People First* and the apparent intention of the Minister to facilitate citizen engagement will provide a challenge to those who have seen and continue to see the work of Local Authorities, including its planning work as primarily the realm of councillors and their expert advisers.

POLITICAL-PROFESSIONAL INTERFACE

As noted above in the analysis of the changes in the elected councillor-professional relationship in Britain, the enhanced role for elected members, including increased scrutiny roles and the operationalising of their community leadership function resulted in a change in both the nature and the extent of the relationship between planners and elected councillors. To date elected councillors in Ireland have had very limited powers in comparison to their counterparts in other EU member states (RPANI 2005). This is about to change. How they adapt to the new role allotted to them in *Putting People First* is unknown. The example of similar changes in Britain suggests that planners will notice a significant change in their work practices and the nature of their relationships for the following reasons:

(a) Councillors will quickly adopt the role of "rigorously overseeing the performance of their organisations" (DECLG 2012, xi) and the areas in which they exercise this role are likely to be increased (DOELG 2012, 148);
(b) With the establishment of Municipal Districts as the primary *loci* for action

and, in many areas, the increase in the number of councillors, it will be more straightforward to scrutinise the activities of the council;

(c) It is likely that the participatory planning processes, some planners envisage as allowing them to work directly with communities, will actually facilitate councillors in their "community engagement" role (DECLG 2012, 148). Councillors may well take the lead in such processes because in public policy term the state has been reluctant to facilitate this type of participatory mechanism despite alluding to participatory democracy[4] and because elected councillors will assume it to be their 'space' as community leaders and representatives and act accordingly, thereby denying planners a primacy they may expect;

(d) As in Britain regionalisation will bring about a number of changes. It is suggested that while *Putting People First* outlines the case for a strong regional planning tier (DECLG 2012, 89) which many planners support, a key role of the Regional Assemblies will be overseeing the development of Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies. These strategies, unlike the analogous strategies of the City/County Development Boards, will have to be "adhered to" by (DECLG 2012, 99). This will mean, as in Britain, a significant increase in inter-agency collaboration to develop binding strategies and this has proved quite difficult for planners, "we have a generation of planners who find it incredibly difficult to move away from land use planning, they talk about spatial planning but what they're really on about, because they are comfortable with it, is land use planning" (Vigar 2009, 1588). In addition the 'marketisation' discourse noted above and the current economic environment are likely to ensure that building or consolidating regional economic competiveness becomes the dominant dynamic;

(e) The final change is broader but relates to very significant difference between the local and national political tiers in Ireland. Ireland is quite different from other small liberal democracies, for example New Zealand, in that at national level the formulation of public policy has largely been the remit of elected politicians with generalist, rather than professional staff, playing a support role (Christensen 2013). There is a significant body of public policy governance literature substantiating this analysis (see Hardiman and MacCarthaigh 2010, Independent Review Panel 2010, Peters 2010 and Smith 2005). *Putting People First* aims to make the local tier more similar to the national tier, with elected councillors taking on a role as "policy makers" rather than "policy takers" (Mair 1992). This change is likely to be the most significant change in how local government operates since the foundation of the state. It is likely to take a prolonged period to change the existing personal relationships and the dominant political culture but in cities, particularly Dublin, the proposed mayoral elections will mean candidates standing on policy platforms that if elected they will expected to be implemented.

[4] For example, the Report of the Task Force on Active Citizenship (2006) and the Green Paper on Local Government Reform (2008).

Tewdwr-Jones (2012, ix) observes in relation to the Britain:

Our planning mechanisms change regularly, as do legal procedures, government structures, and rights and responsibilities, but bigger societal and structural trends are more difficult to change.

All of this must, however, also be considered in the context of the establishment of the role of Planning Regulator and the proposed limitation of the powers of elected members with regard to planning decisions which may impact on the nature of the emerging relationships.

In relation to Ireland, the changes and reforms one would have expected to see over the last 40 years have not happened. As a result the government structures, and rights and responsibilities are about to change radically and change quickly. That remains the key challenge for government as it strives to create the legislation that will operationalize the vision outlined in *Putting People First* and a challenge for planners as they will have to navigate a new politico-legal environment. This may well have implications for planners, their professional bodies and the skills which are focused on in planning education including Continuing Professional Development. Though it may appear somewhat esoteric, it is a matter that should be considered without delay and addressed as a matter of urgency and importance.

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