

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN TRANSITION: PERSPECTIVES FROM IRELAND AND THE U.K.



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**The years 2010-2012 have been testing and turbulent ones for local government across the island of Ireland; with the timeframe for upheaval being even longer in Northern Ireland. The contractions of national economies have obliged local authorities to reduce and curtail their operations; with personnel increasingly having to focus on maintaining day-to-day operations rather than promoting innovation and reform. Indeed, many of the structural and governance reforms that had been initiated during the previous decade are currently on hold. At the same time, growing social exclusion has led to an increase in the demand for local authority services. The climate of austerity within which local authorities currently find themselves creates considerable challenges. Yet, it also presents some opportunities. The overwhelming public desire to learn from the mistakes of the neoliberal 'Celtic Tiger' period in the Republic of Ireland (heretofore referred to as Ireland) and to avoid the largess and inequalities associated with privatisation, deregulation and political corruption is manifesting itself in citizens and government – converging on the need for institutional reform and strengthening of the planning system.**

Since its establishment in 2006, the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) has been committed to ensuring that policy-makers, academics and practitioners throughout

Europe are aware of issues, progress and on-going challenges along the Irish Border. In addition, the ICLRDR serves to promote and disseminate good practice in cross-border collaboration and integrated territorial planning, and to facilitate the transfer of learnings. The development of linkages with regions and institutions beyond the island of Ireland is, therefore, of key strategic importance. In order to advance collaborative linkages with those involved in local government across Europe, the ICLRDR has developed a close working relationship with OLA, the Observatory on Local Autonomy<sup>1</sup>. OLA is a Europe-wide network, with representatives in thirty countries studying and advocating for local autonomy, decentralisation and better local governance. The ICLRDR has been affiliated to OLA since 2009, with Caroline Creamer (NUI Maynooth) and Dr. Brendan O'Keeffe (Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick) representing Ireland on the Network. Northern Ireland is represented by Prof. Deborah Peel (University of Ulster), who is also a member of the Executive Board of OLA.

Collaborations between OLA and the island of Ireland to date culminated in a two-day European Conference in November 2012. Entitled *Local Governance in The UK and Ireland: so near yet so far*, this Conference was hosted by the Université de Valenciennes et du Hainaut-Cambrésis, France on 23-24 November and was jointly organised by OLA and the contact points for the island of Ireland. This event brought together high-level speakers and delegates from Britain, Ireland, Northern Ireland, France and other parts of Europe – including representatives from ICBAN (Irish Central Border Area Network). The Valenciennes Conference was the first major OLA event to focus on these islands, and the ICBAN intervention served to document and analyse, from a practical perspective, the now embedded interfaces between the respective governance and planning systems on the island of Ireland specifically, and the evolving collaborations



*From left to right: Iain Frazer (Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council), Ciarán Tracey (Leitrim County Council), Session Chair, Pádraig Maguire (Border Regional Authority) and Deirdre Frost (Western Development Commission). Copyright: Brendan O’Keeffe*

between the Irish and U.K. systems more generally. The proceedings were streamed live on the OLA website, and several delegates, including policy-makers were enabled to participate via this virtual conference environment.

Addressing the conference on behalf of ICBAN, Ciarán Tracey (Senior Planner, Leitrim County Council) and Iain Frazer (CEO, Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council) outlined how ICBAN has enabled its constituent councils to promote their collective territory as a place that no longer sees itself as peripheral, but one that can be close to, and well connected to, several places. They described to delegates the processes through which ICBAN has progressively and successfully promoted joint structures to enable and sustain local government collaboration across the Irish Border. The presenters took the opportunity to salute the courage and leadership of councillors of a Unionist persuasion, who took risks, but showed tremendous vision and courage by engaging with authorities South of the

Border in order to promote cooperative, area-based approaches to improving regional competitiveness and a better quality of life for all. The presenters also acknowledged the role of the European Union in enabling parties and stakeholders to come together, and they were specifically praiseworthy of previous INTERREG Programmes, particularly INTERREG IIIA, which enabled a community-led and bottom-up approach to project development. They expressed the view that the upcoming INTERREG V Programme should focus on enabling Border communities, territories and regions to realise their development potential, based-on the principles of collaborative, multi-level local governance, with increased possibilities for bottom-up inputs and participation. The ICBAN representatives referred to the importance of cross-border shared datasets and common variables and methodologies in capturing data, so as to ensure that spatial planning has the benefits of clear and agreed baselines and performance indicators.

A number of other Irish and Northern Irish representatives contributed to the conference proceedings. Dr. Sean Ó Riordáin, who chairs the Local Government Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association of Ireland, reported on the progress that has been made in promoting greater local autonomy in Ireland over the past two decades. He described the recently-launched Irish government proposals on further reform (*Putting People First*) as potentially offering the most radical template for reform of decision-making in Ireland since the foundation of the State, and he elaborated on the potential of the proposed Municipal Districts to ensure more localised and accountable local government. The merits of greater localisation, and specifically, a renewed focus on micro-regions emerged as one of the themes in a paper presented by Dr. Brendan O’Keeffe of Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick. This paper, which drew on research undertaken among entrepreneurs and civil society leaders, documented the importance of autonomous LEADER and partnership governance in enabling economic development, active citizenship and generating productive synergies with local government in the delivery of local services. Deirdre Frost, a Policy Analyst with the Western Development Commission<sup>2</sup> demonstrated the merits of a regional approach to policy-making and service delivery, and she used the cases of rail transport and broadband provision to illustrate arguments in favour of co-terminus regional boundaries among agencies. The conference also heard results from a research paper, jointly prepared by Dr. Mark Callanan and Mr. Ronan Murphy of the Institute for Public Administration (IPA) and Dr. Aodh Quinlivan of University College Cork. This paper provoked great interest as it presented data from several countries and dedicated research in Ireland that definitively proved that, relative to other democracies, Ireland has few local authorities, fewer councillors per citizen and more extensive local authority areas. Moreover, their research on the cost structures and efficiencies of Ireland’s local authorities, on a range of selected indicators, strongly questioned the populist assumption that larger local authorities are necessarily more efficient. In many respects, smaller authorities were found to be more

cost effective. These research findings were of keen interest to French delegates, as France has over 36,000 local municipalities, 90% of which have fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. The paper presented by Pádraig Maguire from the Border Regional Authority dealt with aspects of planning and governance systems on the island of Ireland. Welcoming the transfer of planning functions to local authorities in Northern Ireland, this paper described how Northern authorities can learn from the experiences of the South, particularly in respect of zoning land and dealing with the inter-connectedness between the banking, planning and political systems. Referring to proposed and on-going reforms in both jurisdictions, Mr. Maguire welcomed the increased emphasis on the economic dimension of spatial planning.

Having heard about and considered the experiences of practitioners, academics, councillors and analysts from both North and South, together with inputs from those in Mainland Europe who study systems on our islands, the conference noted the importance of maintaining and strengthening the structures currently in place to facilitate cooperative spatial planning, not least:

- The North-South Ministerial Council (NSMC);
- The draft *Spatial Strategies on the Island of Ireland: Framework for Collaboration*<sup>3</sup> and the joint areas of action by government departments;
- The three Cross-Border Bodies namely ICBAN, the East Border Region and the North West Region Cross-Border Group; and
- The Memorandum of Understanding that underpins the Newry-Dundalk ‘Twin City’ Region and the productive collaboration between the councils involved.

These institutional frameworks are being strengthened and facilitated by a number of developments including:

- Changing attitudes among policy-makers that increasingly recognise the merits of place-based strategies and structures, and multi-level governance;



*From left to right: Colin McKenna (ICBAN), Paddy Connaughton (Cavan County Council) and Pádraig Maguire (Border Regional Authority) at the Valenciennes Tramway. Copyright: Brendan O'Keeffe*

- Local government reform and the strengthening of local autonomy in both jurisdictions;
- The emergence and consolidation of all-island evidence-based approaches;
- Cross-border data capture initiatives informing spatial planning policy and practice;
- The alignment of statutory agency plans and actions; and
- On-going research and capacity-building by the ICLRD.

In addition to inputting into the conference proceedings, the ICBAN delegation – which included Cllr. Matt Lyons (Sligo County Council), Cllr. Frankie Donnelly (Omagh District Council), Mr. Paddy Connaughton, (Economic Development Officer, Cavan County Council), Mr. Iain Fraser (Chief Executive Officer, Dungannon District Council), Mr. Adrian McCreesh (Acting Chief Executive Officer, Cookstown District Council), Mr. Ciarán Tracey, (Senior Planner, Leitrim County Council), Ms. Roisin Pearson (Communications Officer, ICBAN) and Mr.

Colin McKenna (Development Manager, ICBAN) – worked to forge bilateral links with Valenciennes, and specifically with the Municipality of Denain. They visited the Town Hall as guests of the Mayor, Cllr. Jacques Delcroix, and held in-depth discussions and exchanged information with Mr. Yohan Senez, the Municipality's Director of Cabinet. In addition to sharing practical information about the workings of the Irish, Northern Irish and French systems of local government and spatial planning, the delegation focused very specifically on inter-municipal and cross-border collaboration. French citizens have a very strong attachment to their local community, and the municipality – no matter how small – is very much part, not just of French administration, but also of French society, heritage, identity and culture. The municipality of Denain has a population of 20,000 people – large by French standards – and like all municipalities in France and throughout most European democracies, it has gained increased autonomy and responsibility over the past twenty years. While most municipalities would like to gain

greater freedoms and secure more state supports, they are generally perceived to have become very adept at local service provision and spatial planning. Spatial planning is a core competence of French municipalities, and inter-municipal collaboration is a hallmark of their approach in this regard. The ICBAN representatives were most impressed by the way in which collaboration between Denain, Valenciennes (pop. 40,000) and some neighbouring rural municipalities had enabled the leveraging of finances to construct a tramway – very similar to Dublin's LUAS (albeit on a single line) – connecting both towns and serving communities along the 12km stretch between them.

From an island of Ireland perspective, the North East of France and specifically, the region Nord-Pas-de-Calais is well-connected and close to the core of Europe, thereby guaranteeing it competitive advantages over other regions. While that is true, particularly from a physical geography perspective, the region has undergone profound and traumatic economic and social change over the past thirty years. The collapse of its traditional industries – mining, steel and textiles during the 1990s – led to spiralling unemployment (in excess of 40% in several municipalities), urban decline and social instability, and it also left communities and authorities with severe financial and ecological challenges as mines, plants and machines had to be decommissioned. Although many of the legacies of de-industrialisation still affect the region, very significant strides have been made in promoting urban regeneration, public transportation and connectivity, community development, social inclusion, re-skilling of the workforce, local economic diversification, ecological conservation and the social economy. Progress on these fronts has largely been driven from the bottom-up, with civic and political leaders taking initiatives and securing legislative, institutional and financial support from regional and national agencies and politicians, including government ministers. This partnership between the local, regional and national extended to networking and collaboration with adjoining municipalities and agencies in Belgium.

Local authorities recognised the merits of cross-border collaboration, and the city of Lille no longer viewed or projected itself as a regional French city, but as a gateway city, serving an extensive area covering Nord-Pas-de-Calais (N.E. France) as well as communities (Francophone and Flemish) in Belgium such as Kortrijk, Tournai, Mouscron and Roeselare.

The ICLRD has previously cited the experiences of Lille, Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Flanders as offering useful insights and valuable lessons in respect of promoting cross-border collaboration. Indeed, in 2007, representatives from the ICLRD, Dundalk Town Council, Louth County Council and Newry and Mourne District Council attended the European Conference on *Cross-border territories: day-to-day Europe* which was held in Lille; an event which, in part, contributed to the development of the Memorandum of Understanding that, since 2011, underpins cooperation in the Newry-Dundalk Twin-City Region.

There are many benefits to cross-border networks participating in European events – both as a 'student' committed to constantly learning of new ways to work together, and as a 'teacher' sharing their experiences of collaboration in the Irish Border region. ICBAN's participation in this significant European event provides further evidence of its commitment to learning and innovating in the drive to promote the sustainable competitiveness of its catchment area. The exposition of its experiences and learnings to an extensive European audience demonstrates how far the organisation has progressed in less than twenty years. The ICBAN structure – like the other cross-border networks in the Irish Border Region – continue to be led by councillors, who are engaged with communities and local businesses, and who are supported by committed staff; and their respective achievements in spatial planning open up prospects for more extensive joined-up development and pooling of resources and expertise. The ICBAN experience resonates with that of Valenciennes, Denain, Lille and Nord-Pas-de-Calais in that for all agencies,

and particularly for local authorities, cross-border cooperation is not an optional extra. Rather, it is core good practice!

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**a practitioner in community development. He has worked with local authorities, government bodies and civil society in a number of European counties, in promoting citizen participation, social inclusion and sustainable rural development.**

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.ola-europe.com/en/accueil/> for further details.

<sup>2</sup> The Western Development Commission (WDC) is a statutory body that was set up to promote both social and economic development in the Western Region (Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Mayo, Roscommon, Galway and Clare) by: ensuring that government policy is directed at improving the social and economic situation in the region; developing projects in tourism, industry, marine, renewable energy, technology and organic agri-food; and operating the Western Investment Fund to provide loans and equity to business and local communities in the West.

<sup>3</sup> It is expected that the final version of the *Spatial Strategies on the Island of Ireland: Framework for Collaboration* (or the *Framework for Co-operation: Spatial Strategies in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland* as it is now known) will be launched by both Governments on the island of Ireland in Spring 2013.