

THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE GENESIS STORY



Tim O'Connor

'Guess who's coming to Dinner' is an old Hollywood classic movie, starring Spencer Tracey. It could also be the title of the genesis story of the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD). In 2002 I was three years into my posting as Southern Joint Secretary of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC). Set up under the terms of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement to promote co-operation between North and South on the island of Ireland, the NSMC was serviced by a secretariat of civil servants from Belfast and Dublin, based in Armagh.

In parallel with my formal role as Joint Secretary of the NSMC, I sought to keep a weather eye out for other interesting ideas for the promotion of new links between North and South to mutual benefit. During the almost 80 years between the establishment of two jurisdictions on the island in the early 1920s and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998, there had been very little interaction between the two sides of the border, something that represented a real loss to both. Now that a new dispensation had been created and that we had, in the words of David Trimble, 'got the architecture right' in terms of taking forward cross-border cooperation, there was an opportunity available to make up for lost time and to bring real benefits to all the people of the island.

That was my context when in September 2002, Harry Casey of the Clonmacnoise Foundation, introduced me to two wise men from the east –

the east of the United States that is. Professor Francois (Frank) Vigier and John Driscoll were two distinguished academics from the Centre for Urban Development Studies at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. As experts in urban and regional development, they had been observing with great interest the transformation of Ireland which had been brought about by peace and prosperity, and they were keen to explore a bit more deeply what lay behind it and whether the answers they would find had application in conflict situations elsewhere. They also wished to explore whether there was a role for their Centre in promoting new links on the island and between Ireland and the US.

I found those questions very interesting. In terms of how we might explore them further I came up with the rather unoriginal idea: let's do a dinner and see what happens (or to borrow the advice of Dick Mackenzie, my colleague as first Northern Joint Secretary – one the first things you do when seeking to advance a new idea is to start talking about it). In our quarters in the Armagh City Hotel I gathered some 16 people on the evening of 12 September 2002, including Frank, John and Harry, and in the course of what proved to be a fascinating occasion, an idea was born, an idea that would eventually lead to the creation of the ICLR. Others present on that evening included my then fellow Joint Secretary Peter Smyth, Michael Ringrose of the Clonmacnoise Foundation, Andy Pollak, Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies in Armagh, and Dr Richard Barnett, then Pro Vice Chancellor of the University of Ulster, today its distinguished Vice Chancellor.

The broad consensus around that table was that there was real scope for a new dialogue on the island around the whole area of regional development and planning, and that the role of these interested but impartial outsiders, namely Frank Vigier and John Driscoll and their Centre at Harvard, could be very valuable in terms of both process and substance. The view was that North



and South and would benefit from a wider and deeper cross-border engagement of this kind. I was given the task of exploring the idea further and in particular of examining whether universities North and South could be persuaded to come on board as partners. Peter Smyth and I also agreed that we should take soundings in both our higher education and governmental systems to see whether there would be support for such a new North-South-US collaboration. Another important design idea emerged that night: that to be effective this new collaboration needed to be not just cross-border but cross disciplinary. Or put another way, I suggested that what was to become the ICLRD would need to take a tripartite approach: cross border, cross campus and cross discipline.

Over the following year or so, Peter Smyth and I took our various soundings. The response generally was very positive. I approached the University of Ulster and NUI Maynooth at head of university level and in both cases – Professor Gerry McKenna and Dr Seamus Smyth respectively – I got a warm response. By late 2003 Professor McKenna had nominated as founding partners the School of the Built Environment in University of Ulster, under its dynamic Head, Dr Alistair Adair, and Dr Smyth the Department of Geography at NUIM, under the leadership of two impressive academics, Professor Jim Walsh and Dr Rob Kitchin. We also received strong support from Athlone Institute of Technology, its President, Dr Ciaran O Cathain and the head of its business school, John Cusack. The Clonmacnoise Foundation and later the Centre for Cross Border Studies and its director, Andy Pollak, were also centrally involved from an early stage.

In terms of the two governmental systems North and South, Peter Smyth and I received a positive response. Cooperation had already been deepening in recent years between the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in Dublin and the Department for Regional Development in Belfast in the areas of spatial planning and regional development, and the principal civil servants involved – Finian Matthews and Niall Cussen in Dublin and Mike Thompson and Jim Hetherington in Belfast – were very open to the contribution that could be made

by an innovative collaboration of the kind we were contemplating. Indeed it was Niall Cussen, who on first being briefed on what we had in mind, memorably observed ‘this sounds like the answer to a question that has not yet been asked’ (but soon would be)!

And so the idea was taking shape. But as ever with a new idea, the question of funding loomed large. For the early answer, we looked South. This was 2004 and the Celtic Tiger was still at full tilt. I had a number of positive discussions with the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, and the then Minister for Education and Science, Noel Dempsey. The outcome was a decision by the Irish Government early in 2004 to set up an inter-departmental committee to examine the idea and bring proposals to government. This Committee, chaired initially by Kevin McCarthy and later by Ruth Carmody, both from the Department of Education, met a number of times and the result was the allocation of core funding to the project, a huge boost at the time and critical to getting it off the ground.

A parallel issue, of course, was to how best to take forward the project in structural terms and bring its existence to a wider audience. In this, we were indebted to an idea of Willie McCarter, at the time the Chairman of the International Fund for Ireland. Willie’s proposal was simple: host a seminar on the idea, invite all and sundry and see what happens. We duly took that advice and with funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs, the inaugural seminar was held in the Radisson Hotel in Athlone in May 2004. On the basis of a mail shot to every institution, organisation and individual to whom we thought the idea might be of interest, 160 people turned up to explore whether it was time for Niall Cussen’s question to be asked. The Seminar was opened by the Minister for Education, Noel Dempsey. Frank Vigier, John Driscoll, Alastair Adair, Jim Walsh, Rob Kitchin, Brendan Bartley and others gave succinct overviews of the state of planning on the island, and the challenges to and opportunities available through cooperation. The response from the floor was highly positive, and the unanimous view was that the time was right to put together a new vehicle to harness those opportunities: the International Centre for Local



and Regional Development was well on the way to being born.

One particularly interesting part of the early journey of the ICLRD was the way that the founding group jelled and worked together. A very positive and warm sense of cohesion and teamwork quickly emerged, aided ironically by the variety of personalities involved. It was an article of faith from the earliest moment that Professor Frank Vigier was the 'founding father'. His wise and learned counsel, always laced with a touch of laid-back Gallic humour, was a key cornerstone of the project. Jim Walsh brought Kerry practicality; Rob Kitchin huge energy; Alasdair Adair and Stanley McGreal a Northern sense of focused organisation and structure. Harry Casey and Michael Ringrose brought key qualities also in those early days. And then there was John Driscoll. Pretty quickly it became clear that this project, born out of thin air as it were, was going to require a very special engine if it was going to be translated from concept to actuality. Into that foggy breach stepped John Driscoll from day one and he has not left it since; without him there would be no ICLRD. He has brought to bear his unique set of skills: great scholarship, an unflagging commitment to hard work and getting the job done, great integrity, and most of all a deep and warm humanity that leaves a lasting mark on everybody with whom he comes into contact. Key to ICLRD's success was that John was the 'well-disposed outsider' par excellence, somebody from a different world who could come among us every month and gently coax, cajole, plead, suggest, insist – whatever it took – to nudge us forward and together in ways that it would have been difficult for us to do on our own in order to complete the journey from an idea around a dinner table in 2002 to the vibrant organization it is today. My own role in those early years was to be a kind of spiritual director: using my position inside the system to nudge things forward, open doors and bring new players and processes into the frame, and generally support John. I should add that I got great support from my good colleague and friend, Northern Joint Secretary Peter Smyth. I avail of this opportunity to record my deep appreciation of Peter's help and friendship: he is a unique and wonderful human being.

I should also say that from the outset this was a fun project to be part of. The sense of camaraderie and of journeying into the unknown was palpable. We met together as a group as often as we could, and augmented that with regular conference calls. Once the Athlone seminar had been successfully held, we set about building the structure and of course trying to raise the funds. A key development in 2005 was the addition to the core team of Andy Pollak and the Centre for Cross Border Studies (CCBS). Andy, a tremendous servant of peace and reconciliation in Ireland and who leads by example in that regard, became a key support to John Driscoll. The role of CCBS has been central to ICLRD's success: CCBS essentially became ICLRD's secretariat. The new organisation was housed in the CCBS offices in Armagh, and most of the Centre's staff – notably Mairead Hughes, Eimear Donnelly, Patricia McAllister, Joe Shiels and Patricia Clarke – have at various times worked for the organisation.

Critical early support also came from an InterTradelreland development grant, backed by its director Liam Nellis and Director of Policy and Strategy, Aidan Gough. Later, after a rigorous application process, the ICLRD received core funding support from the International Fund for Ireland under the chairmanship of Denis Rooney. (I take this opportunity to acknowledge the central contribution to the evolution of the ICLRD by the IFI, initially under Willie McCarter and later under Denis Rooney). In 2009 the ICLRD received EU INTERREG funding – as part of a broader funding package to the Centre for Cross Border Studies – from the Special EU Programmes Body, under the leadership of Pat Colgan. I also want to acknowledge the support of other colleagues in the Joint Secretariat who made invaluable contributions to the evolution of the ICLRD: Deputy Joint Secretary Barbara Jones, Frank Gallagher and Mary McKenna.

A word also about the politicians: it is fashionable to be hard on politicians and it does not look like a profession one enters in the search for kudos and personal affirmation. But in terms of this project, I can truthfully say that without the vision of the politicians



involved, the ICLRD would not have happened. In particular, I want to acknowledge the support from the outset of then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, who saw from an early point that the ICLRD project had the capacity to add real value and benefits to both parts of the island. He was strongly aided by Education Minister Noel Dempsey, who also saw at an early point the benefits that could flow from such a collaboration. I also acknowledge the support of my own Minister at the time, Dermot Ahern, Minister for Foreign Affairs, and of course the then Minister for Finance, Brian Cowen, who provided the vital early seed funding.

The Northern Ireland Executive's involvement started with the return of devolution in 2007, and even though I have not been personally involved since 2005, I know that Northern Ministers have been very supportive in recent years. I should also say that the support of the key officials in the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in Dublin and the Department for Regional Development in Belfast has been a crucial factor in the success of the ICLRD. From the outset, the project was blessed by the fact that there was such a positive and constructive group of people involved in those positions: Finian Matthews and later Dave Walsh and Niall Cussen in Dublin, and Mike Thompson and Jim Hetherington in Belfast. The sense of teamwork on their part and their clear belief in the benefits for both jurisdictions of working together created a very important backdrop in terms of ensuring that the ICLRD contribution would be welcomed and appreciated.

In the summer of 2005 my posting in Armagh came to an end and I was assigned to the position of Consul General of Ireland in New York. My personal involvement in the ICLRD project came to an end for the moment. Of course I continued to follow its fortunes with great interest in the intervening years. In 2007 I was appointed Secretary General to the President of Ireland, so my distance from the project was geographically less remote. Indeed one of my special memories of my privileged posting at Aras an Uachtaráin was being present when

President McAleese visited Frank Vigier and John Driscoll in 2009 at their Institute for International Urban Development in Boston, where she received a briefing on the work of the ICLRD and I know was deeply impressed by what she heard.

In the five years since I left Armagh, I have been delighted with the great strides made by the ICLRD. What has been particularly exciting has been to see a whole new generation of academics becoming involved in its activities, and the enthusiasm with which they carry forward the torch first lit in Armagh all those years ago. The energy, drive and commitment of younger colleagues such as Caroline Creamer, Neale Blair and Karen Keaveney have been a great source of encouragement that the future of the project is in good hands. Of course, John Driscoll's gentle but firm guiding hand continues to be on the tiller and that remains the ultimate insurance that all is well.

It is now over 12 years since the Good Friday Agreement created the opportunity for a new beginning in Ireland. Huge progress has been made in that time, but of course many challenges still remain in terms of consolidating peace and reconciliation, and of ensuring that the new beginning heralded by the Agreement becomes full reality. It is deeply encouraging to all of us involved in its birth and early development that the ICLRD has been able to make its contribution to that journey and will continue to do so for many years to come. When Niall Cussen's question came to be asked, Team ICLRD was more than ready with the answer! It has been a great pleasure and privilege to be involved with such an interesting and exciting project, and of course to work with such a wonderful group of people.

Tim O'Connor was Southern Joint Secretary of the North South Ministerial Council from 1999 to 2005; Irish Consul General in New York from 2005 to 2007; and Secretary General to President Mary McAleese from 2007 to 2010.