

SYMPOSIUM ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM

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1. HOW MUCH LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

The reform proposals issued by the Minister for the Environment on March 7th last envisage an expansion in the role and scope of local government which is very wide-ranging. It includes:

- sub-county structures to cover the entire country,
- a new regional structure between central government and the counties,
- new local authorities in Dublin,
- a devolution of functions from central to local government.

There are no proposals to eliminate any of the existing layers of administration - the urban district councils would be replaced by the new sub-county structures, while the existing and rather haphazard collection of sub-national bodies, such as Shannon Development and Udaras na Gaeltachta, would continue to operate.

The majority of citizens currently enjoy just two tiers of government, national and one local authority. A minority fortunate enough to live in certain towns around the country get a further helping through the urban district council or town commissioners.

under the Minister's proposals, all citizens will now enjoy four layers of government; national, regional, county and sub-county. At full county level, there will be 34 authorities (versus 32 at present), eight regions, and

an unspecified number of sub-county units. At present, these sub-county units number about 80, and represent around 15% of the population. The extension of the coverage of these units to cover the whole country will presumably require an increase in their numbers to several hundred, with several thousand additional councillors.

At present, the average citizen is represented by 2.15 tiers of government, national and local. Under the new proposals, this will rise to 4.0. Aside entirely from cost, the case for this level of representation in a small country is not easy to make in my view, and the report of the Government's expert committee is not persuasive.

2. SIZE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

The population of the new county-level units will average about 100,000. But many are much smaller - thirteen of them had populations under 60,000 in 1986, and some had as few as 30,000 or so. On the face of it, there is a case for a reduction in the number, rather than the increase proposed by the Government. For example, why do we still have Tipperary North and Tipperary South as separate county councils? Many of the smaller counties could be amalgamated into more natural units, and it puzzles me that no consideration appears to have been given to a system, with, say, around 10 basic local authority units nationwide.

At the sub-county level, the existing system means that we already have 87 housing authorities in Ireland, who are entitled to produce 87 differential rent schemes if they so desire.

In 1990, Ballinasloe UDC had a budget which included £30,036 for road upkeep, and £4,744 for road traffic expenditure. It spent £8,286 on industrial development. Clonmel spent £1,000 on swimming pools, £3,800 on education.

If the sub-county bodies are to retain functions in the new set-up, they cannot conceivably reach a viable level of operations. If they are to yield functions to the county-level bodies, it ceases to be clear what justification they might have.

3. REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

In 1973, when Ireland joined the EC, the decision was taken to treat the entire country as a single region, a sensible decision which has proved itself over the intervening period. The setting up of eight regional authorities, regardless of how their membership is chosen, will create bodies which will have nothing to do other than to fight with both central Government and with county councils over functions. Who deals with roads, for example? What has happened to the National Roads Authority?

These bodies are unnecessary, there was no public demand for their creation, they will fill no administrative need and can create a role for themselves only through political battles with existing institutions.

4. REORGANISATION IS NOT REFORM

My dictionary defines reform as:

"to shape anew, esp. to restore to a former good state; to reclaim; to amend; to improve; to regenerate; to eliminate abuse or malpractice; to abandon evil practices."

I am entirely content with the notion that Irish local government is in need of reform. The current proposals will not produce reform, but rather will yield a sharp increase in the quantum of unreformed Governmental activities.

Local government has been steadily losing functions in recent times. Health is gone, and responsibility for housing is increasingly centralised. Performance in the area of road improvement and maintenance has been so poor as to stimulate both a popular competition on national radio for the best joke about potholes, and a National Roads Authority to take some action.

The local authorities' record in pollution control and planning has been so bad as to provoke a new Environmental Protection Agency as well as heavier referral rates to An Bord Pleanála. In their role as the largest landlords in the country, the local authorities manage to spend more on

maintenance than they collect in rents, while simultaneously generating a steady flow of complaints about maintenance standards.

Dissatisfaction with their performance is making local authorities increasingly a dustbin for whatever services are sufficiently unimportant to be entrusted to them.

The Expert Committee's proposal would result in a total of 193 local bodies in Ireland, with a total membership of between 2,000 and 2,500.

Previous proposals to cut the total number are discussed in the Committee's report in the following surreal passage:

"Previous proposals for reform which would have involved a major reduction in the number of town authorities were strongly opposed by the authorities concerned. This would seem to point to the need for an increase rather than a decrease in any reorganisation of local authority structures".

The first part of this statement is equivalent to confining an opinion survey on capital punishment to the current occupants of Death Row. The second part is a remarkable non-sequitur.

5. WHY NOT A SINGLE TIER SYSTEM?

Neither the Government nor the Expert Committee have produced any argument that convinces me against a single tier system. The UK Government has just announced its intention to move to a single tier system, in a country with 55 million people. If Avon or Strathclyde do not need a tier of district councils, I cannot see why Kilkenny needs them. There is no corner of county Kilkenny which is more than thirty minutes drive from Kilkenny city. This is not Texas we are dealing with.

The Government's proposals are a reflection of an Irish proclivity to over-design and over-elaborate administrative and political structures. This country has a smaller population than Lancashire, and land area alone is no justification for such an expansive scheme as has been proposed.

There are, of course, no proposals for an early return to local taxes as a basis for local Government reform. Representation without Taxation would appear to be the political sub-text. It would be a far better use of the electorate's time to debate local taxes, rather than more local government, at the forthcoming elections.

6. A PROPOSAL FOR REFORM

There are strong arguments in favour of both a single-tier system and a minimum size for each authority. The arguments include cost as well as administrative efficiency.

A system with about twenty authorities could easily be achieved. This would involve, for example,

- One authority for Tipperary
- Amalgamations of
 - Sligo and Leitrim
 - Kildare and Wicklow
 - Offaly and Laois
 - Carlow and Kilkenny
 - Cavan and Monaghan
 - Longford and Westmeath
 - Meath and Louth
- Incorporation of boroughs into their counties, e.g.
 - Galway
 - Limerick
 - Waterford

There are other possible combinations. The lower tier of UDCs and town commissioners should be abolished. The number of members on each authority should reflect population, thus ending the virtual disenfranchisement of Dublin for Seanad election purposes.

There is merit in the notion of direct election for the combined office of Mayor/Manager, at least in the cities of Dublin and Cork, as proposed by Donal De Buitlear in his addendum to the Expert Committee's report.

The functions of a single-tier system should be curtailed rather than expanded. Those activities which are currently 100% funded from central Government, such as road construction or housing provision, are best organised nationally. But there is no reason why the single tier authorities should be prevented from the taking of local initiatives in areas which are financed from local revenue sources. Equally, there should be nothing to prevent each authority from establishing committees or town councils within their area, provided no bureaucratic overhead was involved. In this connection, the expert committee's proposal to appoint 151 executive officers to the new district councils should be noted.

The notion of withdrawing functions from local authorities is, in a revealing recommendation, endorsed by the Expert Committee itself.

The single most commonly-used policy prerogative of a local council is the Section 4 motion in planning cases. The Committee wants it abolished.

In conclusion, I feel that areas of public endeavour which are an unqualified success should be expanded and reinforced: areas which perform poorly should be reformed, not expanded. Local administration belongs decisively in the second category, and deserves less powers and less resources. In Denis Healey's phrase, "When you are in a hole, the first move is to stop digging".