

Politics and Administrative Practice in the Irish Information Society

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Abstract: The Information Society is expected to transform political relations in industrial societies, but the extent to which transformations have already taken place is often underestimated. In the past, Irish politicians provided real or imagined patronage in exchange for the electoral support of citizens. The introduction of office information systems in the Irish civil service has lessened politicians' monopoly on administrative information. This increased public access to information has altered traditional politics in Ireland and enhanced democratic participation. However, any further changes should result from conscious policy decisions rather than as unplanned consequences of efficiency-driven IT investments.

In the last five years, reports from national governments (United States, Canada, Denmark, Great Britain, and now Ireland, to name a few) as well as the European Commission have announced the arrival of the Information Society. One striking aspect about the reports is their repetition of rhetoric and propositions made (and critiqued) 10 to 20 years ago. In addition, these reports focus on a future that can or will happen, and so underemphasise changes which have already taken place. It is important to recognise the impact that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have already had. Whether or not the resulting society is to be called an "Information Society", ICTs have already transformed not only economic structures, but also political, social and cultural structures. The consequences may not appear as revolutionary as technological utopians hoped, nor as repressive as technological pessimists feared (cf. Kling, 1994), but they have

been significant none the less. In the context of the recent Irish Information Society Steering Committee report, it is particularly important to focus on transformations taking place in the Irish political system, at least partially as a result of new ICTs.

In the Information Society, new information and communications technologies are expected to transform political systems. For utopians, ICTs will enable greater participation by people in the process of government, both in terms of policy and services. Pessimists fear that governments will more efficiently monitor and control the activities of citizens, gathering information on individuals which would be shared amongst government departments. Both visions share a technological deterministic assumption that transformation in the relation between citizens and the state due to technology is inevitable. It is the utopian view that is often reflected in government policy statements. For instance, in 1994, the *Bangemann Report* (High Level Group on the Information Society) expected that the Information Society would lead to "more efficient, transparent and responsive public services, closer to the citizen and at lower cost" in Europe. The High Level Expert Group on the Social and Societal Aspects of the Information Society (1996) noted that "ICTs create new opportunities for greater public participation in and awareness of the political process". These concerns are reinforced by a desire to improve the image of European institutions, discussed in terms of a "democratic deficit". The recent report by Ireland's Information Society Steering Committee (Ireland 1996) suggests similar policy directions, projecting that "Government will become more accessible and responsive to its citizens' needs" and "The work of front-line providers of information services will be transformed in the Information Society. They will be ... empowered ... to provide citizen-centred services" (p. 22).

These reports imply that politics and citizenship will be transformed in the future. Yet, if one looks beyond the World Wide Web, multi-media, and other dramatic symbols of the Information Age, it becomes clear that such transformations are not hypothetical future events — they have already taken place. The introduction of office information systems into Irish government administration has transformed Irish politics, albeit almost unwittingly. Much has been written about the Irish political system in comparison with other Western liberal democracies (see Coakley and Gallagher, 1993; Chubb, 1992), and a feature that has attracted attention is political clientelism. Irish citizens have believed that, in order to obtain a government benefit or service, politicians had to intercede on the citizen's behalf. Citizens, it was thought, did not receive state benefits as their right; they received benefits as personal favours granted by powerful and beneficent politicians as a reward for political support. A tacit exchange of political support for special

personal preference has been a cornerstone of Irish politics since independence (Komito and Gallagher, 1993).

Studies have documented clientelist politics in Ireland (Bax, 1976; Komito, 1984, 1989; Roche, 1982; Sacks, 1976), and the prevalence of political clientelism in Ireland has been used to explain the lack of policy discussions in Irish politics as well as the sense of alienation which many people feel regarding the state (Higgins, 1982; Hazelkorn, 1986). Factors promoting and maintaining political clientelism have been suggested, including a bureaucracy overwhelmed by an increase in state intervention, a government which did not provide public accountability, a monopoly by politicians on knowledge of the bureaucratic process, and a distrust of the impartiality of the civil service (Komito, 1984; 1989; 1993). While these are not the only factors contributing to political clientelism,¹ they are particularly affected by changes linked with the Information Society.

Over the past few decades, the degree of state intervention in Ireland has increased, and citizens' dependence on state assistance has grown. As the amount of work has increased, office information systems have been introduced to deal with increases in amount, scope, and complexity of decision making. Pye (1992) noted a dramatic increase in IT-related expenditure, in both equipment and staff, in the mid through late 1980s.² Generally, ICTs do not alter political behaviour or administrative practice (Kling, 1996), and Pye noted that, in the Irish civil service, "IT has been primarily a conservative force within government departments, serving in the main to reinforce the status quo" (1992, p. 113). While this may be true within the civil service, IT has had an unanticipated impact on the clientelist exchange of perceived favours for votes. It has, at the very least, altered the basis of Irish political clientelism and, at most, undermined its very foundations.

Previously, administrative delays created a market for political interventions. People wanted to know about the progress of applications that could provide them with significant economic benefits such as a medical card, a grant, or a house (Komito, 1989). With the introduction of office information systems, the processing of cases has speeded up (despite increases in the actual number of cases being processed) and, with less delay, the need for intervention to discover the status of a case has lessened. Furthermore, under

1. Other factors include strong party loyalty on the part of voters, the electoral system of single transferable votes and multi-seat constituencies, and cultural traditions developed during colonial domination (sometimes described as a "dependency culture").

2. For instance, from 1982 through 1987, expenditure was 74 per cent greater in real terms than the previous six years; on a per capita basis, there was an increase of 180 per cent (Pye, 1992, p. 28). Staffing levels showed equal growth; despite a net drop in civil service staffing of 15 to 20 per cent in the 1980s, IT staffing increased by 37 per cent in the same period (Pye, 1992, p. 115).

the previous system, it was difficult, on a practical level, to find out exactly what was happening with a particular case. The answer might only be found on a particular piece of paper on a particular desk. It might not be clear on whose desk the paper was, and, if the person was away or busy, a report might be slow in coming. Direct queries by citizens produced either no answer or an answer only very slowly. On the other hand, civil servants would put other work aside to find the answer to a politician's parliamentary question or informal query. Therefore, citizens approached politicians because politicians were able to find out what citizens themselves could not. This has now changed; with new technology, a departmental information officer can easily trace the progress of cases. Citizens need only post a letter or make a phone call to the relevant department to monitor progress on an application, they no longer need politicians. The monopoly which politicians previously held on information has been undermined, as cases are now dealt with more quickly and can be monitored by the citizen directly.

Clearly, new office technologies are not alone responsible for changes in political clientelism. Due to changes in bureaucratic culture, Irish civil servants are willing to respond to direct enquiries by citizens. This change has been slowly taking place over the past twenty years, beginning in the 1980s with the requirement that decisions should bear a civil servant's name, instead of being made, anonymously, by the department on behalf of the relevant Minister. The 1997 Freedom of Information legislation should accelerate these changes. Inevitably, some government decisions remain subject to private political influence and thus clientelist exchanges. While no state is immune from such corruption, open information can make it difficult to conceal such private influence and this may itself be a powerful restraint.

In addition, there is significant scope for improved access to information using ICTs. For instance, in the early 1980s, Community Information Centres maintained social welfare information in paper binders. When regulations changed, new information sheets were produced, the sheets were distributed to the Centres, out-of-date pages were removed from the paper binders and new pages inserted. This process was slow, labour-intensive, and subject to error. Recently, some Centres have been experimenting with electronic updating of files and regulations. The logical next step is to make such electronic information accessible to the general public, so that intermediaries, whether Social Welfare officers or CIC volunteers, are no longer necessary. Although many citizens cannot afford access to electronic information, whether via electronic mail or the World Wide Web, inexpensive access via public access points in libraries, social welfare offices, third level institutions could be provided, if the political will existed.

It is not sufficient to simply provide information, the information must also

be meaningful and trustworthy. Politicians' power has rested on their knowledge of all the different schemes and programmes — they know which scheme is relevant for a particular person, and they know how to fill out forms in "civil service" language to make a citizen's case most effectively. They are also personally trusted by citizens: clientelism derives from the trust that underpins personal relations; through clientelism, citizens extend that trust to the state as a whole. An information system that replaces politicians (and other intermediaries) must provide the same relevant, trustworthy, and meaningful information. Such a system would encourage the trust between citizens and the state that contributes to civil society, as well as a sense of participation, thus reducing marginalisation and alienation, while also avoiding clientelist dependency. Such developments would also facilitate community development, as seen in Free-Nets in the United States and also discussed by Trench and O'Donnell in this issue (although see Komito, forthcoming, regarding ambiguities in the concept of electronic community).

Previous studies have suggested that politics in Ireland has been conditioned by restricted access to information. This has already started to change, although these changes have largely been unintentional consequences of efficiency-driven ICT investments. Such changes will not necessarily increase public participation in politics or improve accountability in decision making, since providing more information to citizens is not a guarantee of either better services or more democratic participation in the state. However, a lack of information is certain to make a more efficient government or a more participatory democracy impossible, and the changes to date have already altered the nature of clientelist exchanges. Yet, social and political change as an unintentional by-product of ICT investment is not an adequate response to the current Information Society challenge. Additional access to information and more civic participation must result from self-reflective attempts to control and channel technology, rather than walking backwards into the future.

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