Reviving urban democracy: a comparative analysis of British and Irish efforts to democratize city government 1996-2010

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Introduction

Over the course of the past fifteen years there has been a huge amount of material published, both internationally and in Ireland, on the future direction of the government structures. However, a very substantial proportion of the material, both domestic and international, has tended to focus on developments in single countries and at the level of national government. From the perspective of Irish political science, two issues are rather curious. First, given the fact that Ireland as a member of the EU has a long list of potential comparators, it is telling that despite the differences in legal and governmental framework, there is not a lot of material published on urban politics in a comparative Irish-EU context. This is not to deny that some excellent work has been carried out, but rather to suggest that one could have expected more. The second issue is that as a profession, political scientists in Ireland have tended, by and large, to ignore the whole area of urban politics. The work that has been undertaken, much of it of excellent quality, has been carried out by geographers, sociologists and urban economists. This is rather unusual when compared to the situation in other countries.

1 Denters and Rose observe that the publication of Osbourne and Gaebler’s well-known book Reinventing Government in 1992 was a landmark event because it served to register developments that had been taking place in a number of countries and to help set the “terms of the debate” among laymen, practitioners and academics alike about the future direction of the public sector (2005, xiii).
The paper itself is divided into four parts. The first provides a brief rationale for the use of Britain as a comparator, the focus of the paper of the period 1996-2010 and finally, a brief introduction to the terms used in the paper. This is followed by an examination of the Irish experience of democratizing urban government. Part three examines the British case. The final part of the paper provides an overview of the key issues arising from both studies.

**Rationale, period of analysis and terms used**

The paper aims to examine in a more systematic fashion whether or not urban government in Ireland has undergone a fundamental transformation during the past decade or so. Britain was employed as a comparator because, apart from the similarities in legal and local government tradition, it pursued what appears to be a substantial and quite radical programme of reform.

With regard to the period of analysis, 1996 to 2010 is probably the most useful because in Ireland, the beginning of the period saw the publication of the White Paper *Better Local Government*, followed by the Local Government Bill, and the Local Government Act, 2001. Concurrently the period saw the publication of the Green and White Papers on Supporting Voluntary Activity, the enactment of the Planning and Development Act, 2000, the publication of the report of the Task Force on Active Citizenship (2006), the Green Paper on Local Government Reform (2008), the report of the Local Government Efficiency Review Group (2010), and the Local Government (Dublin Mayor and Regional Authority) Bill 2010. In Britain, the period saw 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 saw the culmination of the work of the Lyons Enquiry into Local Government.

With regard to the terms ‘democracy’ and ‘democratisation’, rather than provide a theoretically sophisticated analysis of democracy and processes of democratisation, it is contended that it is more helpful to provide a defence of 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 paper, the focus is primarily on the ‘prudential’ or instrumental justifications for democracy, i.e. democracy as 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, 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 purely to be a matter of technical expertise. 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 complex societies, such as 21st century 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. As Phillips contends, “when experts are suspect and interests collide, decisions have to be kept accountable through some process of democratic control” (1996, 21).

Consequently, this paper focuses on the elements that are widely regarded as being the “necessary components of a healthy local democracy” 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 (Leach and Percy-Smith 2001, 101).
Finally, the paper’s specific focus on urban government rather a more general focus on sub-national or local government relates to the importance cities play in modern society, particularly in our increasingly globalized world where cities have taken on a new importance as nodes in emerging transnational social, economic and civic networks (Ó Broin and Jacobson 2010). In addition, the multifaceted issues of physical dereliction and regeneration, economic decline and renewal, social exclusion and inclusion, and the accompanying issues of human safety and environmental quality provide a broad range of topics for research. In relation to what constitutes a city, it is acknowledged that this represents certain definitional problems. According to a European Union measurement system, only Dublin constitutes a city. While accepting the rationale behind the typology, population, for the purposes of this paper, the definition used will be that laid down in Irish statute, i.e. if an urban area has a city council then it is a city.

The Irish case

In December 1996, “the most comprehensive process of local government reform since independence commenced” with the publication of the White Paper Better Local Government (Forde 2004, 57). The reform process had four key aims: (a) enhancing local democracy, (b) improving customer service, (c) increasing the efficiency of local government, and (d) establishing an appropriate resource base for local government. The White Paper, in time, became the Local Government Bill, 2000 and as such was published on 8th May 2000. It is worth noting that at the time, Noel Dempsey, the Minister for Environment and Local Government, had previously announced that the proposed legislation represented the “most radical shake-up of local government in the history of the state” (The Irish Times 14th May 1999).

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2 Eurostat, the European Union's statistical agency, has created the concept of Larger Urban Zone (LUZ) in an effort to harmonize definitions of urbanization in the European Union. These definitions were agreed between Eurostat and the National Statistics Offices of the different countries of the European Union at the occasion of the European Commission's urban audit of 2004.
It is important to understand the policy environment in which this development took place. The Fine Gael, Labour and Democratic Left government that came to power in 1994 made a commitment in its programme for government, *A Government of Renewal*, to “reform local government and to settle the finance question” (Keogan 2003, 86). The Local Government Reorganisation Commission, established by the previous, Fianna Fáil and Labour, government published a report in 1996, *Towards Cohesive Local Government – Town and County*. A second report, *The Financing of Local Government in Ireland*, was produced by KPMG and examined existing sources of finance and potential funding options. In parallel, a Devolution Commission had been established in 1995 to examine which functions could be devolved to local government. Its *Interim Report* was published in 1996 and its *Second Report* was published in 1997. On an initial reading the proposed legislation had all the appearances of being the fruit of a very robust and detailed review process.

By the time the legislation was published, the four objectives of Better Local Government had changed somewhat and the bill had four key aims: (a) to enhance the role of the elected member, (b) to support community involvement with local authorities in a more participative democracy; (c) to modernise local government legislation and provide for the framework for new financial management systems and other procedures to promote efficiency and effectiveness; and (d) underpin generally the programme of local government renewal.

This paper examines the first and second objectives, i.e. enhancing the role of councillors and providing greater opportunities for public participation, and reviews the process leading up to the establishment of a Mayor for the Dublin city region.
Enhancing the role of the elected member

*Better Local Government* had identified three key areas where the role of councillors could be strengthened:

(a) Improving the “corporate position of councillors” within local government;
(b) Providing more “administrative support” for councillors;
(c) “Widening the remit of local government” (1996, 16).

The subsequent legislation attempted to transpose these aspirations in a variety of ways and with varying degrees of success.

With regard to improving the “corporate position of councillors”, a key innovation in the legislation was the introduction of strategic policy committees (SPC) and corporate policy groups (CPG) to enhance the role of councillors. The rationale behind this was to involve councillors in policy making and the existing committee structure did not facilitate this new policy role. Furthermore, the cathaoirleach/mayor and the chairpersons of the SPCs were to form the corporate policy group. It was “envisaged that this group would have a key function in developing a wider role for councillors” (Keogan 2003, 90). This proposal for a “sort of cabinet” was to provide a mechanism whereby policy positions could be agreed for submission to the full council (*ibid.*).

The legislation also provided for a directly-elected cathaoirleach/mayor. Quinlivan (2000, 16-17) notes that:

In local government circles the reaction to this proposal has been decidedly negative. On the very day that the bill was published, the members of Cork County Council passed a resolution calling on the minister to remove the proposal from the bill. The Local Authority Members’ Association (LAMA), the General Council of County Councils
(GCCC) and the Association of Municipal Authorities of Ireland (AMAI) have adopted a similar stance and, at the very least, are seeking an amendment whereby a person who has not served at least five years as an elected member of a local authority shall not qualify to be nominated for the chair of a council.

This provision was subsequently repealed after a very strong lobbying campaign from councillors and, interestingly, backbench TDs, “many of whom regarded it as depriving them of an opportunity to fill a much-coveted position from within the council chamber” (Kenny 2003, 116). In addition, it was thought by many councillors, and their representative bodies, that enhancing their role would involve some system of parity with other elected public representatives, TDs and Senators. This parity would include the introduction of a salary, an allowance for legitimate expenses and some form of pension. Despite a very significant lobbying campaign, the Minister refused to countenance the introduction of any form of pension scheme. In relation to the provision of more “administrative support” for councillors, this was to a large degree accomplished within resource constraints.

As well as providing the statutory basis for the establishment of Strategic Policy Committees and Corporate Policy Groups, the legislation also saw the establishment of City/County Development Boards (CDBs). This was initially portrayed in some quarters as a way of addressing the exclusion of local public representatives from inter-public agency discussions on local service delivery (Harvey 2003). The CDBs were charged with drawing up and overseeing integrated strategies for economic, social and cultural development within each city/county and overseeing the implementation of these strategies over a ten-year period. The role and experience of the CDBs has been well analysed at this stage. However, while their establishment was seen by some commentators as having greatly expanded the role of councillors, the evidence to date
suggests that there have been some interesting developments in the operations of the CDBs, for example in the area of social inclusion, as a mechanism for enhancing the role of councillors they have not been successful (Ó Broin 2004, 37-52 and Ó Broin and Waters 2007).

Supporting community involvement

In relation to the objective of supporting community involvement in public policy decision-making, it is important to note that in addition to the process of analysis and discourse that preceded the Local Government Act, 2001, the government also initiated a separate process designed to increase citizen and civil society participation in public policy. In 1997 the Green Paper *Supporting Voluntary Activity* included the concept of active citizenship as central to the new vision for Irish society. It defined active citizenship as:

> the active role of people, communities and voluntary organisations in decision making which directly affects them. This extends the concept of formal citizenship and democratic society from one of basic civil, political, social and economic rights to one of direct democratic participation and responsibility. In this sense citizenship is a political activity that gives citizens the opportunity to shape the society in which they live. Groups are given the opportunity to become involved in identifying local needs and developing strategies to meet these needs. Active citizenship is also about the strengthening of voluntary and community organisations. In modern society this process is particularly important in combating the potentially negative effects arising from centralisation of both economic and political decision making, and the consequent alienation of large numbers of people, such as the long-term unemployed (Government of Ireland 1997, 25).

This was followed by a White Paper *Supporting Voluntary Activity* in 2000 that proposed that civil society will play a more active role in shaping socio-economic change and addressing multi-dimensional needs, its understanding of civil society is imprecise at best. For example, the White Paper stated that it would welcome:
(a) A more active role for civil society in adopting innovative approaches and
technologies to mobilise action at both the policy and practical level;
(b) Increased dialogue and consultation between Government and Non-
Governmental Organisations;
(c) Greater transparency and accountability on the part of all the actors in terms of
their activities, their priorities and outcomes (Government of Ireland 2000, 47).

In conjunction with the provision of the Local Government Act, 2001, local authorities
were faced with a strong argument for developing a more participative local democracy.
For the purposes of this paper, it is useful to distinguish between mechanisms designed
to facilitate engagement with local citizens and communities, ‘complementary forms of
representation’, and those designed to facilitate the involvement of more structured civil
society organizations, ‘local social dialogue’.

Complementary forms of participation

In relation to the development of complementary forms of participation, it is helpful to
define these “as systems or structures established by state agencies that operate at the
junction of the state and civil society and seek to augment rather than replace or
compete with existing representative governmental structures” (Khan 1999, 17).
Complementary forms of participation include citizens’ juries, planning cells, choice
questionnaires and public health panels.

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3 Citizens’ juries were developed in the United States but the approach has been widely used in Britain. There has been an attempt to develop the approach in Ireland but to date it is limited. As of June 2004 five citizens’ juries had been established in Ireland.

4 The planning cell system was first used in the German town of Schelm in 1972. It bears some similarity to the citizens jury model but planning cells tend to be larger (25 as opposed to 14-18 members) and often break into working groups whereas citizens’ juries tend to work in plenary.

5 The choice questionnaire is designed to provide a highly sophisticated method for establishing public opinion. Typically it is 5-10 pages long plus separate information cards for each policy alternative to be considered. They have been widely used in Switzerland since the early 1990s.
In Ireland’s case, these mechanisms are nearly non-existent. A small number of citizens’ juries have been organised, for example in Ballymun in 2003. In addition a number of ‘planning for real’ exercises have been run, though these have tended to be funded via EU programmes. In general the main mechanism for engaging citizens and communities in particular policy matters is the ‘public meeting’ and for a number of reasons, this represents a very unsatisfactory way of involving or consulting community opinion.

Local social dialogue

Local social dialogue is distinguished from complementary forms of participation by the scope of its remit and the duration of the relevant structure’s existence. Complementary forms of participation tend to be very task-oriented, often addressing a single spatial planning or service delivery matter and then disbanding. The model of social dialogue envisioned in this paper takes a broader perspective and its existence is not limited to the completion of a single task. For example, the Local Government Act, 2001, provided for two distinct mechanisms. First, the SPCs were devised to allow one third of the seats to be allocated to stakeholders working within the particular policy area. Second, the CDBs are structured to provide a number of seats to civil society organisations, and finally, CDBs have established community fora to facilitate a sustained dialogue with community-based organisations on a city-wide basis. What evidence is available suggest that these have been a modest success but in many cases raise false hopes and frustrations for groups. It is this paper’s view that one of the major obstacles and frustrations facing members of CDBs is that they expect them to act like

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6 Public health panels in Britain are established in a similar manner to citizens’ juries in that the members are selected to represent the community as a whole rather than represent the interests of particular users, carers or single-issue activist groups. Unlike citizens’ juries, they exist over a period of time so that their views are sought over a series of meetings as a standing panel.
decision-making bodies rather than mechanisms to sustain dialogue between different stakeholders in the public policy decision-making process (Ó Broin 2002).

Establishment of a Mayor for the Dublin city region

As “part of the proposed modernisation of Irish local government a directly elected mayor with executive powers” is expected to be introduced in Dublin in 2011 (Quinlivan 2008, 609). It is expected that the system of elected mayors will be extended across Ireland. Wollman notes that the “demand for the strengthening of political and administrative local leadership”, in particular the direct election of mayors is a global movement (2008, 279). As noted earlier, this is not the first attempt to establish directly elected mayors but it appears to have, at the time of writing at least, gained considerable momentum. At this stage it is too early to accurately assess the potential impact of the new office. However the outlines of some key issues are emerging. These include:

(a) The relationship between the new mayor and the existing Lord Mayor and Mayors/Cathaoirligh;
(b) The relationship between the new mayor and the existing managers, in particular the city manager;
(c) The role of the new mayor in relation to transport planning.

Unfortunately while the outlines of significant conflict can be perceived, for example it has recently been proposed that the new mayor will take over the official residence of the existing Lord Mayor of Dublin, along with the Lord Mayor’s chain of office and ceremonial carriage, the many benefits that should accrue from having a directly elected mayor have been obscured due to the nature of the debate.
The British case

The role of elected local government in Britain has changed dramatically over the past 28 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 urban government in Britain. Many academics and policymakers contended that local government had failed to adapt themselves 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 city 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 1997-2006 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. 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 usages 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 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.

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” (Practhett 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 ‘community leadership’”(2000, 131). The concept had been developed during the party’s long years of opposition and is based on the premise 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 the local authority playing the 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
Urban 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, urban 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, to manage services delivered by others, for example the Training and Enterprise Councils, and to emphasise partnership in problem solving, for example the establishment of Urban Regeneration Corporations. What characterised these agencies were 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, are 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, that is decision making growing out of more open discussion, reflecting on the opinions of others and pursuing reasoned arguments. By 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 unBritish, focus groups, standing citizens panels, deliberative opinion polls, consensus conferencing. 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 have recommended the adoptions of PR-STV.

**Developing new forms of political leadership**

The British, and to a more limited extent, the Irish, system 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.

Conclusion

In many countries traditional approaches to city government are being transformed. 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. For the majority of European liberal democracies, public involvement the detail of public policy decision-making has been the exception rather than the rule.7 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.

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7 The European Convention on the Future of Europe (February 2002-July 2003) defines the European model of democracy as built on three main principles. The “first is representative democracy, the second, participative democracy, and the third, social dialogue” (European Foundation 2003, 4).
In this context, and having examined the route followed by Britain, this paper argues that Ireland still has a great deal to do to develop appropriate processes of democratization 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 with reservations over the Labour government’s belief that reducing the barriers to participation at elections and more 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). It is interesting to note that the Conservative Party manifesto commitment “to legislate to hold mayoral referendums in England’s twelve largest cities” appears likely to occur (Hope and Wanduragala 2010, 6).

It is this paper’s conclusion that the process leading up to the Local Government Act, 2001 represented a lost opportunity to:

(a) *Expand the role of city government*, particularly with regard to the idea of competitiveness and the key role cities play in globalized economic networks. At the same time, city government has become more involved in developing more integrated approaches to social inclusion in a manner similar to Britain.
(b) Enhance, in an appreciable way, the role of councillors, particularly in the area of civic leadership.

(c) Embed a culture of citizen participation, despite the establishment of SPCs, CDBs and community fora, Ireland has been incredibly poor at setting up complementary forms of participation. Local social dialogue has been sustained but it is argued that this is more a reflection of the national partnership process than an embedded process.

Further compounding this lost opportunity has been the lack of debate around the contributions Ireland’s cities make. It is this lack of debate, as much as the obstacles to developing and consolidating institutional change, that will impact on any dramatic improvement in the extent to which citizens are empowered to decide how their cities should be run.
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