DE GRUYTER
OPEN

Administration, vol. 63, no. 2 (2015), pp. 1–4
doi: 10.1515/admin-2015-0007

Introduction

Aodh Quinlivan

Department of Government, University College Cork

There is nothing permanent but change. (Heraclitus)

Change is the common thread which runs through this special edition. The Irish local government landscape has been altered fundamentally by the Local Government Reform Act, 2014, which reduced the number of local authorities in the Republic from 114 to 31. Equally, local government in Northern Ireland has entered a new era with its 26 pre-existing councils reduced to 11 from April 2015. Both jurisdictions also had local elections in 2014, which – in the case of the Republic at least – produced dramatic results, with a major swing against the government parties.

This edition features six articles and three forum pieces. Authors were asked to describe, monitor and comment on the recent changes in local government. Accordingly the articles have a practical, rather than theoretical, focus. The opening article by Bríd Quinn offers a useful overview of local government reform efforts, with a concentration on the period from 1971 (when the government produced a *White Paper on Local Government Reorganisation*) to the present day. It is clear from the various reform initiatives over the years that the political will has often been lacking when it comes to implementing change. The words of Edmund Burke also come to mind: ‘Change does not equal reform. For change to be regarded as reform, it must result in something better than before; it must result in an improvement.’ We have seen changes in the Irish local government

system since 1971 but not all have led to improvements. Quinn concludes that the reform trajectory combines innovation, incrementalism and entrenchment, and that systemic problems remain.

Colin Knox and Paul Carmichael bring us through the evolving system of local government in Northern Ireland, employing both a retrospective narrative and a prospective analysis. Though the number of local authorities has been reduced from twenty-six to eleven, the new councils have been given power over a range of additional functions. There have been some teething problems as the new structures take root, but overall the authors strike an optimistic note and argue that community planning and the power of general competence offer opportunities for local government in Northern Ireland to develop and prosper.

Adrian Kavanagh comprehensively examines the political landscapes, North and South, following the local elections of 2014. In Northern Ireland the new structures described by Knox & Carmichael and the abolition of the dual mandate led to an influx of new candidates. Overall, however, the results saw a continuation of the cleavage between Unionists and Nationalists, with the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin retaining their dominant positions. In the Republic more volatility was evident, with significant gains for Sinn Féin and other anti-establishment parties and groupings at the expense of Fine Gael and the Labour Party. Increasing fragmentation at the local level has led to some interesting alliances and arrangements, although only two local authorities have arrangements which do not involve Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael. Both of these are in Dublin (Dublin City Council and South Dublin County Council), where there are left-leaning alliances involving Sinn Féin, Labour and other left-of-centre parties and independents.

Women's participation in the elected and administrative structures of local government are analysed by Fiona Buckley and Caroline Hofman. Women continue to be under-represented in our council chambers but, at 21 per cent representation, the 2014 local elections produced a record high. The authors argue that the Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act, 2012 – which introduces gender quotas for the next general election – created a 'contagion effect' at the 2014 local elections, with most political parties increasing their number of women candidates. This article also highlights that women are under-represented at chief executive and senior management levels in local government. The authors call for greater objectivity in promotion calls, with the inclusion of a gender audit of

female and male candidates' qualifications and essential criteria for positions becoming a feature of selection processes.

Aodh Quinlivan describes the development of the management system since it was introduced with the Cork City Management Act, 1929. Managers – now called chief executives after the Local Government Reform Act, 2014 – share powers with the elected members. The manager has responsibility for executive functions and for the implementation of policies produced by the members. Legislation passed in 2001 threatened to alter the management system in a fundamental way with the direct election of mayors (from 2004), who would have a five-year term and executive powers. The decision to introduce directly elected mayors was reversed by legislation in 2003 and, despite a couple of half-hearted efforts since then to introduce a new mayoral model, the system has remained the same. The author argues that mayoral models are so strongly embedded internationally and have become such a dominant feature of local government that it would be surprising if the introduction of directly elected mayors in Ireland did not soon return to the political agenda.

The financing of local government is always topical, and John Considine and Theresa Reidy analyse the details of revenue and expenditure trends for local authorities over the last decade, as well as the impact of the 'great recession' from 2008. The authors claim that over the past thirty years very few changes to the model of local government finance have stemmed from a coherent, policy-focused plan. Rather, changes to local financing are introduced as a reaction to critical junctures or crises. The local property tax offers local authorities the prospect of increased revenue derived from their own resources, but this is a system which was forced on them as the result of a deep national financial crisis. The authors recommend capacity building within a local government system which has large variances in budget out-turns and outdated expenditure classifications.

This special edition is enhanced by three forum pieces with a strong practitioner focus. Jamie Cudden sets out the global trends in urban development and argues that local government has a pivotal role to play. The Dublin City Region is used as a case study, where there have been a number of innovative approaches to supporting economic development, including 'Activating Dublin'. The author expresses the hope that the enhanced role for local government in economic development, as envisaged in the Local Government Reform Act, 2014, will better align local, regional and national economic and community development.

The merger of the former North and South Tipperary County Councils is the subject of Joanna O’Riordan’s piece. This merger took place in June 2014 and so it is too soon to reach definitive conclusions about the process. The author claims that, given the scale of the operation and the number of stakeholders involved, the merger was managed effectively but that certain aspects of the planning and implementation could have been handled better. The merger in Tipperary provides many opportunities for the new authority beyond the initial key driver of cost reduction.

Appropriately the special issue ends with a thought-provoking opinion piece from Marcia D’Alton, who is a member of Cork County Council. She provides a commentary on the abolition of town councils in 2014 from the perspective of a local public representative working on the ground. She was a member of Passage West Town Council and stresses that, even though the council had few powers, it was singularly focused on the welfare of the town and helped to forge a sense of identity and togetherness, which is now lost.

The views expressed in these articles cover a wide spectrum of topics. While the pursuit of a common theme can sometimes be futile, it is clear that change and the management of change run through all of the pieces, especially in the context of the Local Government Reform Act, 2014, which is referenced by all authors. Accordingly, this special edition is timely and helps to partially fill the gap in what is an under-researched area of study.

I am very grateful to the eleven authors who have contributed to the special edition, as well as to the reviewers and the *Administration* team at the Institute of Public Administration.