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A commentary on localism, place and identity following the abolition of town councils

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For some towns in Ireland, the boom years represented little more than a multiplicity of Legoland-type housing estates distending the age-old, locally recognised town boundary, ever-increasing congestion on local roads and a gradual reduction in playtime for schoolchildren as yard space gave way to prefabricated units. Passage West was one such town with this experience.

Passage West is a small town on the western shores of Cork Harbour, situated some 10 kilometres from the southern suburbs of Cork City. The population has increased by over 60 per cent in the last 20 years, growing to 5,700. Yet despite the influx of new residents, Passage West was one of those towns where dereliction became an increasingly problematic trend throughout the 2000s. With a run-down main street as an urban core, the town had few commercial developments. Severe overcrowding in the local primary school prompted new parents to turn left towards the city suburbs for schooling. Consequently childhood friendships were formed outside the town, leading to poor parental commitment to local businesses and voluntary organisations.

Many of the town's new residents were totally unaware that Passage West was special in the context of local government: it had a town

council. Formed in 1924 by massive local effort when the town's commercial life was vibrant, its role was recognised largely by only the families with generations of Passage West lineage.

Little wonder that the town council was less than widely celebrated. Anecdotally, Passage West was generally regarded as a place one tried to pass through as quickly as possible. Many criticised the nine elected members of the town council for their failure to grasp the opportunities of the Celtic tiger, to set the town up on its feet for the advent of the twenty-first century.

But there was little Passage West Town Council could do towards structural, fundamental change. As the former Passage West Town Commissioners, it had neither the rating powers nor the planning or housing functions afforded to former urban district councils. The major local issues of town planning, traffic congestion, dereliction and litter control were all handled by Cork County Council. If the town council had had respectable finances at its disposal, it might have coordinated the renewal of urban open spaces. But it had not. It managed on a severely restricted annual budget of approximately €40,000. If its offices at the Town Hall had been accessible for even some limited period of each day, it could have become, at a minimum, a portal for local information. But with the town council's only two administrative officials assigned from full-time duties in the county hall, the Town Hall stayed firmly locked.

The busy town of Carrigaline is a 15-minute drive from Passage West. Designated as a satellite of the city by Cork County Council in 1970, when it had a population of merely 971, Carrigaline is now home to over 15,000 people served by 6 primary schools and a significant community school. But unlike Passage West, Carrigaline had no town council.

It made little sense to the residents of Carrigaline that, while 80 other towns around the country had either town or borough councils, its massively increased population was not afforded equal opportunity to self-govern at local level. So while in Passage West each town councillor represented 578 people, in Carrigaline, where residents could elect representatives only to Cork County Council, the elected representative to population ratio was 1:11,000.

Was Carrigaline's resentment justified? Certainly, if the function of local government is to represent the citizen, there is little equality in having some citizens more represented than others. Towns all over Ireland are seeking recognition and identity. If this were not so, why have over 300 rural communities around the country voluntarily

established community councils? And if there was one key thing that the town council achieved, even within its limited capacity, it was to give Passage West that sense of identity.

With its intimate knowledge of its own place, the town council had an overall vision for Passage West, aims it ensured were recognised in county-level statutory documentation. It supported local concerns with regard to major planning applications. It championed the quest for improved local facilities. Its regular liaison with the local area office of the county council afforded the town regular attention to all those simple things that go unseen unless they are not done, such as grass-cutting, footpath maintenance and weed control.

But the social function of Passage West Town Council extended well beyond its operational capacity. Rather than condemning voluntary and community groups to repetitive fundraising efforts, the town council stretched its limited budget to contribute to many worthy local causes. In acknowledgement of their efforts to brighten the town's urban core, elected members made regular monthly contributions out of personal expenses to the local Tidy Towns group. A letter of acknowledgement and thanks from the town council last Christmas to one retailer who had made a special effort with Christmas lights meant so much. One elected member maintained a community website sponsored by the town council, the reach of which went well beyond official town boundaries.

That is where the main strength of town councils lay: in the personal touch. Territorial approaches are recognised the world over in meeting the unique strengths and weaknesses present in rural communities. This is the real ethos of the European Charter of Local Self-Government: public responsibilities should be exercised by that layer of local government closest to the citizens. But what public responsibilities were Passage West Town Council charged with? What is the effective purpose of a layer of local government with no power, no funding and no staff?

There is little doubt that reform was necessary to deliver both equalisation and real devolution of governance. The municipal district concept introduced in the government's 2012 action programme, *Putting People First*, offered potential (Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012). It promised similar levels of representation to all towns in Ireland, the governing of each town in association with its natural rural hinterland and potentially devolved powers from county to municipal level. And although the action programme meant that Passage West would see a twelve-fold

reduction in local representation, Carrigaline was anticipating a 65 per cent increase.

But that potential has been lost in implementation. Central government appointed a Local Electoral Area Boundary Committee to advise on the delineation of the new municipal districts. The five-strong committee was Dublin-focused and constrained by specified terms of reference. The consequence of their work is that Carrigaline now finds itself not at the focus of its new municipal district, but rather at its very extremity. Worse, the boundary of the new municipal district runs through the centre of Carrigaline such that the town has been split in two. One half of its residents now reside in the Ballincollig–Carrigaline Municipal District whilst the other half lives in the Bandon–Kinsale Municipal District. So not merely has the poor application of the municipal district concept caused Carrigaline to be separated from its rural hinterland, it has caused complete division within the town itself.

It is difficult for the people of either Carrigaline or Passage West to find affinity with the new municipal district. Residents of Carrigaline are proud of Carrigaline; the people of Passage West feel an equally strong sense of place and attachment to their own town. Realistically, how can they feel affinity with an administrative jurisdiction that has no allegiance to traditional urban boundaries? Most consider the municipal district to be a dis-improved variation on the traditional electoral area.

Perhaps if the promised devolution of county-level powers had come to pass, the outlook would be different. In the initial stages of the municipal districts' set-up, councillors were excited at the prospect of making meaningful improvements at local level. But that opportunity has been quashed by government itself. Paragraph 4 of S.I. No. 231 of 2014 prohibits the performance of any reserved function within a municipal district that might cause inconsistency with a policy, strategy, programme or plan of the local authority. So although, for example, Schedule 14A of the Local Government Act, 2001, considers the arrangement of pay parking within a municipal district to be a reserved function, ministerial guidelines have warned that such arrangements cannot be enacted if they upset either the overall local authority budget or the resources available to the local authority. In practice, the local authority's chief executive officer has forbidden elected members from making any changes to pay parking within their municipal districts without the blessing of the corporate policy group, of which he himself is a key driver.

To be fair to the chief executive officer, he is accountable to the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government. The financing of his organisation is massively dependent on central government handouts in an environment where general purpose grants have fallen by 43 per cent in the past six years. Little wonder then that the discretionary funding granted to the committee of the Ballincollig–Carrigaline Municipal District is the equivalent of €5.50 per citizen.

And whilst the action programme spoke of full devolvement of reserved functions in such areas as planning, roads, traffic, housing and environmental services, the involvement of local representatives in these crucial services is as yet largely unchanged.

With its 94-year history of a town council, there is strong political awareness in Passage West. Despite having only 8 per cent of the population of its municipal district, 20 per cent of the municipal district representatives live in Passage West. Indeed, during the 2014 local election, 30 per cent of the 20 candidates competing for seats had a close association with Passage West. Local governance nurtures local ambition, and because the town council had been so closely intertwined with the fortunes of Passage West for so many years, local government has always been seen as accessible; in essence, part of everyday life.

In practice, the two public representatives elected to the municipal district from Passage West have a far more comprehensive portfolio than heretofore, as elected members of the town council. Not merely do they have to perform the job of the previous nine town councillors, the breadth of issues with which they now deal is incomparably intricate. Furthermore, because the 5,700 people of Passage West are but a fraction of the 72,000-strong municipal district, to be successfully re-elected after the current term, those representatives must appeal well beyond the Passage West town boundary. Their failure to be re-elected would distance Passage West from decision-making, thereby decreasing the chances of the town's needs being heard.

So what was once considered to be a part-time position has, for the conscientious public representative, become very much more. Now longer hours and a higher workload rewarded by a modest remuneration militate particularly strongly against women with children from becoming involved with local politics. At town council level, after-hours local meetings made it entirely feasible to bring issues encountered in everyday life directly to the local government table.

When political leadership is local, party politics tend not to get in the way of good decision-making. Certainly that was largely the case within Passage West Town Council. The issues were too real, too relevant to the everyday lives of the elected members. Accountability was strong. It was easy within the context of the town to see who turned up for town council meetings, which elected member was digging with the Tidy Towns, who trained the local football team and who collected for a charity outside the gates of the church on a Sunday. In the twelve-fold larger municipal district, accountability is largely a function of connections to newspapers and the monetary resources necessary to produce and distribute regular newsletters. For representatives who are not backed by the network and finances of a political party, this is indeed a challenge.

Whether initiated by pride in their town or the desire to belong, there is no doubt that many feel the need to contribute to some aspect of their community. Otherwise how can one explain myriad volunteer involvement in Tidy Towns groups, Meals on Wheels, scouting or the church choir? It is but a small step for such volunteers to become formally involved in a town council. Their experience and perspective is thus harnessed at the local government table. But because the leap from volunteerism to municipal district level is distant and profound, local government will now never be the beneficiary of such knowledge.

In this era post the action programme, the reality of decision-making has not changed. Public representatives can still not effect the slightest modicum of change without the approval and financial backing of administrators who, whether attached to the local authority, to government departments or to government-appointed quangos, are ultimately unelected and unaccountable. And it is towards securing such approval and backing that the energies of public representatives continue to be directed in virtual entirety.

Passage West Town Council had no power to secure either agreement or finance from any quarter. But because it was singularly focused on the welfare of Passage West, it gave the perception of power. It thus performed as a cohesive core, giving Passage West a sense of identity, of togetherness. So while the business of public representation continues unchanged at county level, that intangible was lost when the doors of Passage West Town Hall were closed forever on 29 May 2014.

Reference

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