

Chapter 7

Institutionalizing the Politics– Administration Dichotomy in Local Government: Reforming the Council– Manager System in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines local government in Ireland, with a particular focus on the evolution of the council-manager form within the Irish local government system. Strengthening executive leadership within local government is an enduring theme of local government reforms internationally, typically manifesting itself through stronger directly-elected mayors or cabinet-style executive structures. An alternative approach used in some jurisdictions is the ‘city manager’ or ‘council-manager’ model, whereby a non-political manager is given significant autonomy to work within a policy framework established by the elected council. This chapter also examines other reform themes in Irish local government, such as territorial and structural changes, functional and financial reforms, efforts to facilitate greater citizen participation in local government, and the influence of New Public Management and efficiency reforms in response to the financial crisis and great recession after 2007.

INTRODUCTION

Governments around the world have been experimenting with different ways of strengthening executive leadership in local government. In most cases, this has manifested itself through establishing or strengthening the office of directly-elected mayor, which has a long tradition for example in North America and has also become increasingly popular in many countries, for example in Europe and South America. Other means of strengthening executive leadership in local government include the role of ‘cabinet’-style structures, where a small number of elected office holders are given executive responsibility for different

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local government service areas, used in countries such as the Netherlands and most local authorities in Great Britain. Both of these approaches involve a strengthening of the political executive within local government (see for example contributions in Berg & Rao, 2005).

However an alternative approach used in some countries has been to establish a strong executive structure around a non-political officer, often referred to in the international literature as the ‘city manager’ or as the ‘council-manager’ form. This model envisages a prominent leadership role for an appointed professional manager or chief executive, working within a policy framework established by the elected council, but with significant autonomy from the political system in terms of more operational day-to-day decision-making. This model is most commonly associated with the United States, where it emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century. Along with the United States and Ireland, Mouritzen and Svava (2002) also associate the council-manager form of local government with Australia, Finland, and (to some extent) Norway, while Howard and Sweeting (2007) also associate this form with New Zealand¹. Indeed while much prominence is given to the mayoral model in the United States (where it is the dominant executive form in the very large and therefore the most prominent cities), statistics suggest that more and more medium and smaller US cities are adopting the city manager model. The proportion of US local authorities (with a population above 2,500) using the council-manager system went from a third in 1990 to a half in 2005, while there was a similar decline in the use of the mayoral model during the same period (Svava & Hoene, 2008). The council-manager system remains the model used in over half of US local authorities above a population of 2,500 (International City/County Management Association, 2014).

This chapter looks at local government reform in Ireland, with a particular focus on the origins, evolution and reform of the role of the city/county manager position², a role often associated with policy initiation within local government, and a position with significant legal powers and responsibilities. The chapter firstly describes the local government system in Ireland, its constitutional position, territorial and internal local authority structures, and local government responsibilities. Second, the chapter reviews recent developments in local government reform. Third, the chapter describes the origins of the council-manager system in Ireland, placing it in the context of the turbulent years immediately following Irish independence. Fourth, the chapter describes the policy responsibilities of the elected council under law, and fifth, the operational responsibilities of the manager/chief executive. Sixth, the relationship between the elected council and manager/chief executive is analysed, suggesting that the initial view when introduced that the Irish council-manager system amounts to a rigid application of the politics-administration dichotomy is an over-simplification of actual practice. The chapter then reviews in more detail the manager’s/chief executive’s relationship with, seventh the elected council, eighth relationships with local interests, civil society and public agencies operating locally, and ninth relationships with national governments. Tenth, the chapter reflects on the influence of New Public Management-type reforms on the role of the manager/chief executive. Eleventh, some reflections are offered on recent changes to how the manager/chief executive is appointed, and implications arising from possible future reforms to strengthen the political executive within Irish local government.

BACKGROUND: OVERVIEW OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN IRELAND

The present system of local government consists of 31 units of local government (comprising 3 city councils and 28 county councils). Together these 31 local authorities cover the entire territory of the

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