Local Government (Restoration of Town Councils) Bill 2018.

Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government,
Leinster House,
Dublin 2.

Introduction

One interesting aspect of the 2011 general election campaign was the extent to which questions of political reform came to the fore like in no other previous general election.

All the political parties advocated the view in their manifestos that political reform was central to the economic recovery of the state (Suiter & Farrell, 2011: 30–38). All three of Ireland’s main political parties (at that time) did point to local government as needing significant reform.

The subsequent reform that took place resulted in a reduction of local authority members from 1,627 to 950 and a significant reduction in Local Authorities from 114 to 31. The new arrangements and structures would ‘improve democratic responsibility and accountability, community identity, responsiveness to local issues, subsidiarity, coherence and efficiency; yield cost savings and better value for money and generally strengthen local government’ (Putting People First, 2012: vii). Minister Hogan argued that the ‘whole tenet of my policy is to make sure there is a rebalancing of power to the democratically elected local councillor and away from the management system’.

The result of the Local Government Reform of 2014 is that the County has become the dominant political entity in regards to decision making at local level. As a consequence of this, the stated aims of Phil Hogan and the principles contained within the putting people first document have not been fulfilled.

The outcome could have been different if the reform had not eliminated the powers of the town and borough councils. I speak today in relation to my hometown of Drogheda and how the changes resulting from the 2014 Local Government Reform have impacted on the local citizenry.
Drogheda is the largest town in the country with a population of approx 42,000 people living within the urban network. When the rural areas of Tullyallen, Monasterboice, Termonfeckin, etc. are taken into account the population rises to approx 56,000. There are currently 10 councillors, 2 Lab, 2 FG, 1 FF, 2 IND and 3 SF on Drogheda Borough Municipal District and they represent Drogheda on Louth County Council.

**Accountability and Responsibility**

The old Drogheda Borough Council was a local authority in its own right, with all the statutory powers that go with it, e.g., planning, roads, environmental etc.

In this scenario, democratic responsibility was evident and meaningful because the decisions that were taken at local level by councillors could be traceable to factors within their control.

In contrast, under the current local government set up, decisions can be made by Louth County Council that can have a negative impact on Drogheda, and the councillors who vote in favour of these decisions will not be accountable to Drogheda citizens. For example, it is within the remit of Drogheda Borough Municipal District to set pay parking rates for the town and seek to ring-fence a portion of this revenue for spending exclusively within the Borough District Boundary.

At the 2018 Drogheda Borough Municipal District Annual Budget Meeting I proposed raising the parking charges and ring-fencing money to be spent in Drogheda. At that meeting, the Chief Executive of Louth County Council said that if Drogheda councillor’s agreed to the proposal, she would bring a new parking by-law proposal to the county meeting to overturn the one set at the DBMD. Councillors at the DBMD Annual Budget Meeting actually voted to set a new pay parking by-law rate of 1 euro. (the old rate was 1.20). However, at the Louth County Council Annual Budget Meeting in November councillors voted to set a parking charge by-law for the county of 1.20, which nullified the decision taken by Drogheda councillors at their District meeting in October. (The 10 Drogheda councillors at the county meeting voted against the 1.20 rate).

This is evidence of how a decision taken at Municipal District level can be overturned at county level against the wishes of Drogheda councillors, if a majority of county councillors vote to do so. In other words, the citizens of the town might wish that their councillors increase taxation so that money can be spent improving for example heritage structures, and this may not happen because councillors in Ardee and Dundalk object to the proposal and outvote the Drogheda councillors at the county council meeting. This example also highlights how responsiveness to local issues can be lost at county level.

**The Role of Mayor**

It could also be argued that community identity has been diluted in that the role of Mayor of Drogheda is now a secondary function to that of the Chair of Louth County Council.
The 2014 Local Government Reform stated that the Chair of the County Council was the first citizen of the county. This has caused much angst among Drogheda people and their politicians. Furthermore, while many people can have a negative view of politicians, the role of Mayor was “owned” by the people of the town and because of the reforms a perception was created that the political status of the town was further downgraded.

**Remote Management**

Since the reform of local government the number of local authority staff allocated to Drogheda and their role has changed considerably.

The post of town clerk has gone and we have a town engineer who cannot make decisions without deferring to a higher authority at county level. This can result in bad decision making.

For example, in 2018 there was a significant demand in Drogheda from social housing tenants for maintenance to be carried out on their homes. A large portion of the housing stock is over 30 plus years old. Housing staff from the Borough Council days would have built up an extensive knowledge base in regards to council tenants and therefore could make accurate decisions in regards to prioritising maintenance requests.

However, in 2018 the decision making on maintenance issues for Drogheda was made in Dundalk. The lack of local knowledge resulted in some minor maintenance requests being sanctioned while more serious ones were left waiting. This caused considerable annoyance to tenants, some of whom had to wait until after Christmas for works to be carried out and further strengthened the perception in Drogheda citizens’ minds of “we are being governed by Dundalk”. In essence the town is being managed remotely. There is no meaningful council presence in Drogheda.

Furthermore there is no specific Drogheda Town Development Plan. The old plan was devised by the then Drogheda Borough Council 2011-2017. This plan covered conservation, heritage, infrastructure, tourism, environment, recreation and amenities, housing and communities and much more, all of which is specific and meaningful to the people of the town.

There was no review as to whether the aims and objectives of this plan were achieved. This in itself is a staggering indictment of the failure of the 2014 reforms and the need to reintroduce town councils. This is further evidence that the reforms led to a dilution of community identity and distrust of the political system.

**Subsidiarity**

A stated aim of the 2014 reforms was to develop and expand the concept of subsidiarity. The general aim of the principle of subsidiarity is to guarantee a degree of independence for a lower authority in relation to a higher body or for a local authority in relation to central government. It therefore involves the sharing of powers between several levels of authority,
a principle which forms the institutional basis for federal states. (European Union Fact Sheet).

However, I suggest that the local government reforms of 2014 went against the principle of subsidiarity in regards to Drogheda. Power and resources, e.g. decisions for roads, planning and the environment were taken from the local and devolved to the central. Local democratic structures and local consumers and communities were politically disenfranchised.

The political representatives at local level, i.e. Drogheda, had their power to make decisions for their town diluted or indeed in some cases eliminated. Furthermore, civic groups such as the Drogheda City Status Group and business groups such as the Drogheda Chamber Of Commerce advocate for a return of the town council to Drogheda.

The reforms failed to bring local government and decision makers closer to the citizen and failed to enable citizens to participate more effectively in shaping the public policy decisions and service outcomes that impact upon their lives.

Rebalancing Of Power

In my opinion, the power of the Chief Executive greatly exceeds the powers of elected representatives. For example, Louth County Council is now the leading shareholder in Drogheda Port Company.

However, councillors in Louth County Council, across parties, had a preference for Louth County Council to take control of Drogheda Port Company as an administrative unit, rather than as a shareholder.

Councillors voted unanimously in favour of the administrative option. However the chief executive decided on the shareholder option and negotiated accordingly. The recommendation of 29 councillors had no impact on the final decision.

There is no meaningful rebalancing of power in regard to chief executive/councillor relationships.

Conclusion

While the Local Government Reform Act 2014 was well intentioned it failed in its primary purpose of bringing meaningful local government closer to the citizen. In contrast, focusing on political and local government reforms that can plan and account for urban led growth of towns and their environs holds out greater promise for a positive closer citizen/Local Government relationship.

Cllr Pio Smith,
References.

Hogan is quoted at  http://www.thejournal.ie/number-of-local-authorities-to-be-slashed-from-114-to31-637272-Oct2012/