

ABOLITION IS THE TALK OF THE TOWNS

Recent calls by Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin to reintroduce town councils, stressing that their removal resulted in the devastation of civic participation nationwide, has raised the thorny subject once again. However, Olivia Kelleher finds that not everyone is in agreement, with some citing that abolition is now history.

Speaking earlier this year at University College Cork Mr Martin said up until the abolition of town councils, Ireland had 1,627 elected local government members. He said the average population per councillor in Ireland was 2,815 people with this figure being the highest proportion in the EU.

Mr Martin said the removal of town councils only had a “miniscule fiscal impact” even though it had been proposed as a major cost saving measure. “The slash-and-burn approach taken by Minister Phil Hogan in dealing with town councils is not the way forward. These measures will only further distance people from their Government.”

In June the Local Government (Establishment of Town Councils Commission) Bill 2017 was introduced by Fianna Fáil Spokesperson on Local Government Shane Cassells TD.

The Bill aims to bring decision making power back to local communities. All 80 town councils were abolished in 2014 by the then Fine Gael/Labour Government.

TOWNS AT A DISADVANTAGE

Deputy Cassells said abolishing town councils has left many urban areas without a voice. “It resulted in paltry savings and instead robbed people of local representation and deprived towns of having a council dedicated solely to fighting their corner.

“Its replacement – the Municipal District system – has clearly left towns at a disadvantage. Even the Labour Party, which was part of the Government that dissolved town councils, has now recognised what a mistake it was to abolish them.”

He said town councils, which had served their communities extremely well over the course of over 100 years, were wiped away at the stroke of a pen. It was, he said, a “butchery” of



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democracy, and the worst attack on Ireland’s local government systems in 100 years.

Two reports commissioned on the matter by Housing Minister Eoghan Murphy are expected to be published in December. Meanwhile, Sinn Féin TD for Louth and East Meath Imelda Munster has also called for the process to re-establish town councils.

Deputy Munster spoke of the damage done to Drogheda

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM



Fianna Fáil Spokesperson on Local Government Shane Cassells TD said abolishing town councils has “left many urban areas without a voice”.

since its council was abolished. “The abolition of the town councils in was an unmitigated disaster for Drogheda. For all of the 80 towns that lost their town and borough councils. Drogheda is the largest town in Ireland.

“The Labour party and Fine Gael stripped Drogheda of its borough council status, town clerk, and all local authority departments bar one. The new system of

municipal districts is proving to be ineffective. They are toothless tigers.”

Deputy Munster also criticised the financial aspect of the Act, saying that claims by the Minister for Environment of the day, Phil Hogan, had apparently not come to pass. “What was the benefit of the abolition of the councils? It does not appear to have made much of a saving for the exchequer.

“The Department claimed in a statement prior to the introduction of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 that savings of €15 million to €20 million per year would be achieved through the abolition of town councils.”

EXTENSIVE GEOGRAPHICAL BRIEF

At a local authority level Kilkenny-based Fianna Fáil Councillor Joe Malone told ‘Council Review’ that the abolition of town councils has been an “utter disaster.

“I cover 14 parishes. A parish priest covers one parish in three counties – the border of Carlow, Wexford and Tipperary. And that ain’t working. We have no powers. Phil Hogan was on local radio and he said the councillors have extra powers and if they do I would like to know what they are. There is a town hall (in Kilkenny) that has 400 years of history and there is now only two offices there and that was the powerhouse of the town. The councillors are only there once a month. We have no staff. They are gone without notice.”

Cllr Malone says his brief as a councillor is geographically extensive. “I am living in the middle of Kilkenny city and my brief goes out to New Ross. That is a massive area. We are here with



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12 councillors and five of them are city based. I work 17 hours a day for buttons.

“And nobody can tell me that the the county councillors have anything but a major workload. We are mini TD’s and we are not getting any recognition for it. We have to buy a lottery ticket to support all the clubs in the parish. We are losing money.”

ALL HAS CHANGED UTTERLY
Fine Gael activist in Wexford town, Angela Roche Reville, says the abolition of town councils changed local politics forever.

“The Local Government Act, introduced by the then Minister of the Environment Phil Hogan, promised reform and better local government. It certainly reformed but not necessarily for the better.”

Reville says that in the instance of Wexford Borough Council, which was built on “hundreds of years of tradition, history and excellent delivery to the people”, the act also removed the honour known as the Freedom of The Borough which had been bestowed on John Redmond, Dr Tom Walsh, Mary Robinson and President John F. Kennedy among others.

Ms Reville says Wexford and

other towns have been stripped of their budgets and their power to deliver for the people as they did very well up to 2014. “Whereas previously all enquiries to Wexford Borough Council were handled efficiently by very approachable officials and staff, all that has changed utterly. Try getting through to certain departments in the county council via a phone line, you will get a voice mail, leave a message and be very lucky to get a reply.

“Emails to certain departments are at times not replied to nor are their issues addressed. There is no privacy either as the public meet the officials now in a very open and public area. This is not an attack on the staff but rather an attack on a new system that is just not working.”

SUPPORTERS OF ABOLITION

However, the abolition of town councils has not been without its supporters with many members of the Fine Gael party standing by Phil Hogan’s decision. Cllr Kay Dawson who is based in Fermoy, Co Cork

says it is has been a largely positive move to date.

“We are only three years in the process. There are definitely some teething problems with it. But to immediately jump towards re introducing town councils is to me a step that would not benefit the public.



At a local authority level, the former Mayor of Kilkenny Cllr Joe Malone says the abolition of town councils has been an “utter disaster”.



“To immediately jump towards reintroducing town councils is a step that would not benefit the public,” claims Cllr Kay Dawson who is based in Fermoy, Co. Cork.

“Tremendous work has been done by Cork County Council to create a bottom up approach where you have municipal officers working closely with people on the ground and the county council working with people on the ground to see what they want delivered. I am not saying that we have got it all right. But it is too soon to jump in straight away. I think this is premature. It is populist politics.”

Cllr Dawson still believes that Phil Hogan made the right decision. “I still believe that he did the right thing. There was no fairness in the old system. Since (the abolition) there has definitely been an increase (in Cork County Council) in the level of engagements with citizens.

“Whenever there is a void whenever there is a change people struggle with it. But are they (Fianna Fail) really saying that the new system isn’t working at all? It has worked here in Fermoy. Fermoy has a forum that has taken off.”

‘BEDDING IN PERIOD’

The Director of the Association of Irish Local Government, Liam Kenny, says the abolition of town councils is now “history” and that the new system is currently undergoing a “bedding in period”.

“The new framework needs to be given a full five-year time cycle before it can be properly assessed. It is a reform after well over a hundred years of the previous town council system. It needs to be given the full five years to assess how well it is

working and what if you like adjustments need to be made.

At the end of the day the public want the services delivered. They want potholes fixed, the library doors open the fire brigades to roll. Whatever structure to make that happen is the one to be pursued.”

In relation to the proposed strengthening of Chambers of Commerce Mr Kenny says councillors are the ones with the mandate. “It is the elected council who, at about this time every year, have to go in and take on the very challenging business of raising the money be it through rates or other charges to run the town for the year.

“It is only right in terms of fairness and accountability that the ones who raise the money are the ones charged with that money.”

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