

DIRECTLY ELECTED MAYORS NEED POLITICAL BRAVERY

There have been many attempts made over the last two decades to introduce a system of directly elected mayors in Ireland, but the lack of political will has meant that nothing has happened, according to Dr Aodh Quinlivan, Department of Government and Politics, UCC.

In Dáil Éireann in January 2018, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Eoghan Murphy, responded to a question by the Green Party leader, Eamon Ryan, on the subject of when directly elected mayors would be introduced into Irish local government.

The Minister's answer disappointed many people. He indicated that plebiscites may be held in Dublin and Cork in May/June 2019 to coincide with the local elections. In other words, people would be asked if they favoured the introduction of this system. A 'yes' answer could lead to direct mayoral elections in Dublin and Cork at the following set of local elections in 2024.

I say 'could' simply because governments do not have to act on the outcome of a plebiscite. Deputy Ryan was dismayed at the Minister's response, saying that the issue was being "long-fingered indefinitely".

Before assessing if this is the case, it is worth taking a step back and defining what is meant by directly elected mayor. At present, across our 31 local authorities, mayors are elected by their fellow councillors to serve for a 12-month period.

PRE-DETERMINED ELECTIONS

In other words, they are directly elected as councillors by the people, but are indirectly elected as mayors by their council colleagues. Mayoral elections are usually pre-determined based on the political power in council chambers and it is not uncommon for pacts and voting arrangements to be in place.

Back in 2009, I interviewed members of Cork City Council for



Dublin's Mansion House on Dawson Street – the residence for the city's Lord Mayor.

a book entitled *Inside City Hall Politics*. Independent Councillor Kieran McCarthy said that "the politics of the pact is eating away at the love for the office of Lord Mayor".

Of course, democracy is often about numbers and the majority rules – the danger is the mayoralty can be based on a version of 'pass the parcel' and can lead to a cosy complacency. And once councillors have decided who will be mayor for the

DIRECTLY ELECTED MAYORS

coming year, the reality dawns that the position is largely ceremonial.

Not only does the mayor not have any extra powers, it has been well documented that the Irish local government system, as a whole, is weak due to the vice-like grip of central government. A shiny mayoral chain can suggest a semblance of power, but it is largely symbolic.

MOVING TO A NEW MODEL?

What would change if we moved to a model of directly elected mayors?

If we had men and women elected to lead their local authority, voted directly into power by citizens, typically for a full five-year term?

The idea of directly elected mayors is an appealing one. Dr David Sweeting from the University of Bristol has written that directly elected mayors are a traditional feature of local government in the US, Canada and Japan. In recent times, they have been introduced as a reform measure in England, Italy, Poland, Hungary and Germany, to name but a few countries.

It is difficult to argue against directly elected mayors on democratic grounds, given that we are talking about electing leaders directly by popular vote. Sweeting notes that *"directly elected mayors are portrayed as being more visible, more accountable, more legitimate and more powerful than any other sorts of local leader."*

"As a result, it is asserted that directly elected mayors are therefore better equipped with greater capacity to govern than other sorts of political actor." This all sounds eminently sensible – who could be opposed to a model of directly elected mayor?

CASE FOR DIRECT ELECTION

In August 2016, Harry McGee made the case in The Irish Times for an elected mayor for Dublin. He argued that *"Dublin isn't competing with Limerick or Waterford. Its rivals include London, Paris, Berlin, Madrid and Barcelona. It's competing with them for investment, tourism and conferences."*

However, the key sentence in his article was the following: *"the city needs an identifiable medium-term political leader who can speak on its behalf and will have powers to influence transport and traffic policy, sustainable transport, tourism, trade and economy, marketing, infrastructure and other services."*

It is hard to disagree with this sentence but, given the fact that most of the powers McGee cited are currently outside the functional remit of Irish local government, he is proposing a



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radical shift in central-local relations. Is there the political will to make this shift?

I am not convinced there is. I am even more certain that the officials in the Custom House (home of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government) do not want to see this happen. The half-hearted stalled efforts over the past 17 years are telling.

Directly elected mayors, take one: It is worth remembering that legislation was passed in 2001 under then Minister Noel Dempsey, to introduce directly elected mayors, for a five-year term, with executive powers from 2004. The 2001 Act was noteworthy for its lack of detail about the precise functions of the mayor and how the office would impinge on the traditional role



In April 2008, Environment Minister John Gormley published his Green Paper, entitled 'Stronger Local Democracy: Options for Change', a well-framed discussion of the directly elected mayor issue.

of the city/county manager (now called chief executives). These issues were never clarified and, in a dramatic shifting of positions, the government repealed the directly elected mayor proposal from the 2001 Act two years later.

Directly elected mayors, take two: The matter was put on hold until 2007 when a coalition government was formed with Fianna Fáil, the Green Party and the Progressive Democrats. The three parties produced a Programme for Government, which pledged to introduce a directly elected mayor for Dublin with executive powers by 2011. In addition, the Government promised a Green Paper on Local Government Reform to address the issue of directly elected mayors.

In April 2008, Environment Minister John Gormley published his promised Green Paper, entitled 'Stronger Local Democracy: Options for Change'. Though the Green Paper was essentially a consultation document, it contained a useful and well-framed discussion of the directly elected mayor issue.

The Green Paper ultimately served its purpose in that it presented options for change and it did so in a thought-provoking manner. Alas, by the time the Government left office nearly three years later, no White Paper had been produced and none of Minister Gormley's reform ideas had seen the legislative light of day.

Directly elected mayors, take three: It was a further three years before the issue of directly elected mayors came forward again in legislation, this time under Minister Phil Hogan's Local Government Reform Act, 2014. The legislation proposed the holding of a Dublin plebiscite on the issue on the same day as the 2014 local elections.

However, the Minister controversially included a provision that each of the four local authorities which constitute the Dublin Metropolitan Area – Dublin City Council, Fingal County Council,

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He has two books due to be published in 2019. The first tells the story of the dissolution of Dublin Corporation 'Vindicating Dublin – The story behind the controversial dissolution of the Corporation in 1924', while the second examines the impact of public management changes over the past decade on local government 'Public Management and Local Governance in the Republic of Ireland'.



South Dublin County Council and Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown County Council – would firstly have to individually adopt a resolution in favour of holding the plebiscite.

The insertion of this veto power for any one of the four Dublin local authorities was a curious move by the minister and always had the potential to open up the proverbial can of worms. And so it proved.

FINGAL BLOCKS PLEBISCITE

Three of the four Dublin local authorities comfortably adopted resolutions in favour of the plebiscite, but Fingal County Council did not. Advocates of the directly elected mayor idea were appalled by the fact that the plebiscite had been blocked despite the overwhelming majority of councillors in Dublin voting in favour.



Minister Phil Hogan's Local Government Reform Act 2014 proposed the holding of a Dublin plebiscite on the issue on the same day as the 2014 local elections.

The combined total vote was 98-19 and yet the minority of councillors against the proposal successfully rejected it. Rather than putting the decision to have a directly elected mayor in the hands of the citizens of Dublin, Minister Hogan placed an unnecessary obstacle into the process. Effectively, between the Minister and his officials, the plan was deliberately sabotaged from the inside.

One of the reasons why members of Fingal County Council voted against the proposal was that the 2014 legislation did not provide enough detail about the role and powers of the mayor and so people would not know precisely what they were voting on.

This is a valid point, as is the one made by the former Dublin City Manager, John Tierney, who has argued that grafting a directly elected mayor onto the current system without any meaningful changes to local government responsibilities and financing, will not make any appreciable difference.

This supports an argument put forward by Prof Colin Copus of De Montfort University in Leicester that the elected mayoral model has struggled in England due to the lack of power and meaning of local government.

MORE TIME IS NOT NEEDED

Is Minister Eoghan Murphy right to stress that more time is needed to study directly elected mayors and to work out the details (bringing us to the 2024 local elections)? No, he is not and he is being disingenuous because we are not starting from a blank page.

In a Twitter discussion with Eamon Ryan following their exchange in the Dáil, Minister Murphy stated: *"It is not just about a mayor or an election though. It's about reforming structures across at least four local authority areas, and with a dozen or so departments and agencies. It is do-able but it must be done right if it's to be real."*

I could accept this argument if it were not for the fact that we legislated for directly elected mayors in 2001 and 2014. In between these times, much of the groundwork was done during Minister Gormley's time in office and draft legislation was



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prepared.

Reports have been commissioned, research has been done and committees have been formed. We have been on this road for the best part of 17 years and we now need political will and bravery.

Given that we are not at a blank page stage, it is entirely feasible to hold a plebiscite (or plebiscites) in the autumn with a view to having direct mayoral elections next summer in line with the local elections.

To quote Al Gore from *An Inconvenient Truth*: *"We have everything we need, save perhaps, political will. But, you know what...political will is a renewable resource. The solutions are in our hands. We just have to have the determination to make them happen"*.

**This article first appeared on 21 February 2018 on RTÉ Brainstorm (a partnership between RTÉ and UCC, NUI Galway, University of Limerick, DCU, Dublin Institute of Technology, Ulster University and Maynooth University). RTÉ Brainstorm is where the academic and research community contributes to public debate, reflect on what's happening in the world and communicate fresh thinking on a broad range of issues.*