

# WHAT NOW FOR MAYORAL GOVERNANCE IN IRELAND?

With the citizens of Cork and Waterford having rejected the proposal for directly-elected mayors for their cities, this raises some challenging questions for the future of local government reform in Ireland, writes Dr Deiric Ó Broin, Senior Research Fellow at the School of Law and Government at Dublin City University.

**T**he plebiscites undertaken in Cork, Limerick and Waterford, but not Dublin, were expected to herald a new start for local government in Ireland. So, what do the results mean for local government reform in Ireland?

Despite Cork and Waterford's apparent lack of appetite for directly-elected mayors it appears that because Limerick has voted to introduce a directly-elected mayor the policy will remain on course.

The decision by the government on 11 June 2019 to establish a Citizens Assembly to discuss local government arrangements in the Dublin area and the previously-announced decision that Galway will also be asked to vote on a directly-elected mayor in 2021 means that elected mayors are going to be a critical element of our system of local government from now on.

However, the reasons behind the decisions of the voters, or at least what we can discern from public discussions, to vote against the proposal for directly-elected mayors pose questions for how local government reform processes are formulated, agreed and implemented.



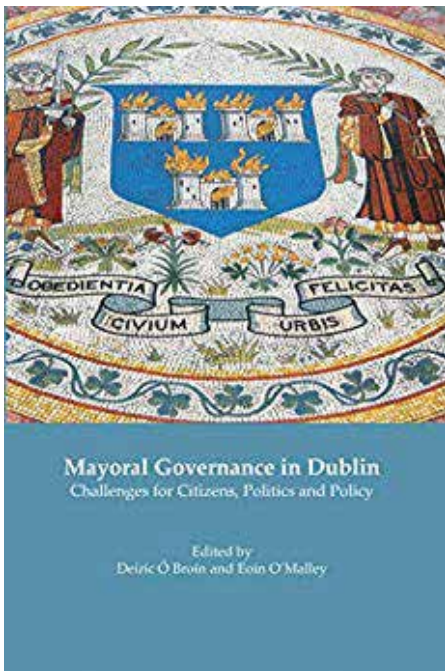
*Pictured at the launch of 'Mayoral Governance in Dublin: Challenges for Citizens, Politics and Policy' at Dublin City Hall in April were (l-r): Eoin O'Malley, DCU's School of Law and Government; Prof Brian MacCraith, DCU President; Prof Cathy Gormley-Heenan, Pro-Vice-Chancellor – Research & Impact, Ulster University; John Paul Phelan TD, Minister for Local Government and Electoral Reform; and Dr Deiric Ó Broin, DCU's School of Law and Government.*

## LESSON TO BE LEARNED

There is wide public and cross-party acceptance that it is at the city and local level that the most critical services affecting human development are controlled. The quality of housing, urban design, transport and the connectivity of communities are all affected by local policies.

Local government is the level at which many of the collective

## MAYORAL GOVERNANCE



*Edited by DCU's Deiric Ó Broin and Eoin O'Malley, 'Mayoral Governance in Dublin: Challenges for Citizens, Politics and Policy' makes the case for a directly-elected mayor for Dublin through a collection of 11 essays.*

*The book draws together contributions from academics and practitioners in the public policy, political, local government and local development sectors, including the IPA's Mark Callanan, Colin Copus, Director of the Local Governance Research Unit at De Montfort University, Cllr Dermot Lacey, former Lord Mayor of Dublin, and Ruth McManus, DCU's Senior Lecturer at the School of History and Geography.*

challenges facing the Dublin region, there are lessons for all of those arguing for local government empowerment and directly-elected mayors.

### LOCAL LEADERSHIP

The first relates to the importance of leadership, quite simply, local leadership matters. It can make the critical difference to the quality of life in cities. What makes the directly-elected mayor so attractive as a public institution is that it facilitates better city leadership by making city leaders and their work more transparent and by attracting different types of civic leader to the role than the situation to date.

Simply by having a mandate and the willingness to advocate on behalf of specific issues allows mayors to negotiate with central government. It is not just about having specific powers, though these are useful, it is the profile direct election brings. The directly-elected mayor becomes a very powerful ambassador

action problems citizens face daily can be solved. But these challenges have the potential to create a new way to think about democracy in our cities.

A recently published book 'Mayoral Governance in Dublin' arises from a long discussion between academics, locally elected councillors, local authorities, political parties and civil society activists. This included a conference and engagement with representatives of Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour, Greens, Social Democrats, Workers Party, the People Before Profit Alliance and a number of independent councillors.

While the primary focus of the book was the particular

for the city and when they use their profile appropriately they can leverage improvements well beyond the powers granted to them under the legislation.

### SUBSTANTIAL OPPOSITION

The second lesson reflects Ireland's apparent lack of regard for the local tier of governance. Taken in conjunction with the strong centralising dynamic within the Irish State, there are a significant number of potential and substantial obstacles to introducing directly elected mayors.

Cork and Waterford's decisions were not necessarily unexpected, however regretted, and reflect one important element of the opposition to any significant institutional change. Beneficiaries of any existing system are inclined to oppose change.

It would be naïve to expect otherwise. In a system like Ireland's where local government has one of the narrowest range of competences and powers in the EU and where councillors have some of the most limited powers over policy and operational decisions in the EU, there was always going to be substantial opposition to any change, particularly something as pointed as introducing directly-elected mayors.

Whose 'power' would they take? This was an opportunity to really elect a 'first citizen' rather than a 'first councillor' and it is, and is likely to remain, too radical a departure for some.

### EMPOWERMENT AGENDA

The third lesson is linked to the need to take local decision-making seriously. Directly-elected mayors are a welcome institutional reform but there are a number of other very significant reforms necessary to adequately equip local government in Ireland to meet the challenges it faces. The mayor must be given more power to set priorities in terms of transport and housing.

A directly-elected mayor, while welcome, is but one of the items on the empowerment agenda. For example why is the National Transport Authority responsible for transport in Dublin rather than an agency under the remit of directly-elected Dublin mayor, as is the case in London?

These powers will have to be added in time as the role grows. It is hoped that the recommendations from the Citizens Assembly to discuss local government arrangements in the Dublin area can be applied to Cork, Limerick, Waterford and Galway in time.



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## MAYORAL GOVERNANCE



*Strong and effective executive mayors exist without direct election in some cities, such as Paris.*

This raises another question and one that appeared to resonate with some voters – whether a strong executive mayor needs to be directly elected at all. There are some fears that direct election might lead to celebrities taking office. Does Cork want a Boris Johnston? We can see in some cities, such as Paris, that strong and effective executive mayors exist without direct election.

### MEDIA & PUBLIC SCRUTINY

On balance I strongly believe, as do nearly all of my colleagues, that a directly-elected mayor is the only way to go. It brings attention to the work of the mayor and means she/he will have to show progress on the electoral promises they committed to or they won't get re-elected.

Quite simply in a political culture such as Ireland, a directly-elected mayor will be scrutinised by the media (TV, radio, press and more) in a way similar to the Taoiseach.

Direct election will bring more publicity and public scrutiny than indirect election. For example if the councillors of Waterford City & County Council were the electorate rather than the citizens of Waterford does anybody believe we would have the same level of interest?

Directly-elected mayors are not a panacea to all that ails local government in Ireland or a fix for the governance challenges of

complex city regions. The introduction of mayoral governance in Limerick will undoubtedly cause problems for the existing local political and executive management regimes, but we will learn from these.

Mayoral elections provide opportunities for voters to rebel against established party machines and powerful stakeholders. As such it was a considerable leap of faith by the voters of Limerick to introduce it and the other Irish cities will benefit from their decision.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Dr Deiric Ó Broin is a Senior Research Fellow in the School of Law and Government in DCU where he lectures in Irish politics and public policy. His teaching and research focuses on urban and regional governance and development. He is Co-Convenor of the Local Government Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association of Ireland.*

