

Local Government – The Cinderella of the Irish Political System

One resembling the fairy-tale, Cinderella, such as:

- (a) Suffering undeserved neglect
- (b) Suddenly lifted from obscurity to honour and significance



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STRUCTURE

- ❑ Single tier system of 31 local authorities
- ❑ 114 until elections of 2014 – abolition of 80 town authorities (75 Town Councils, 5 Borough Councils)
- ❑ 1,627 councillors reduced to 949
- ❑ 3 City Councils – Dublin, Cork, Galway
- ❑ 26 County Councils – including three in Dublin
- ❑ 2 Combined City and County Councils – Limerick, Waterford
- ❑ Comparatively, very few local authorities
- ❑ Is local government local?
- ❑ Council per 160,000 citizens
- ❑ France – 1:1600; Germany 1:5000
- ❑ ‘If local government is not local, it is nothing.’
- ❑ *Irish Examiner*, 1 April 2019



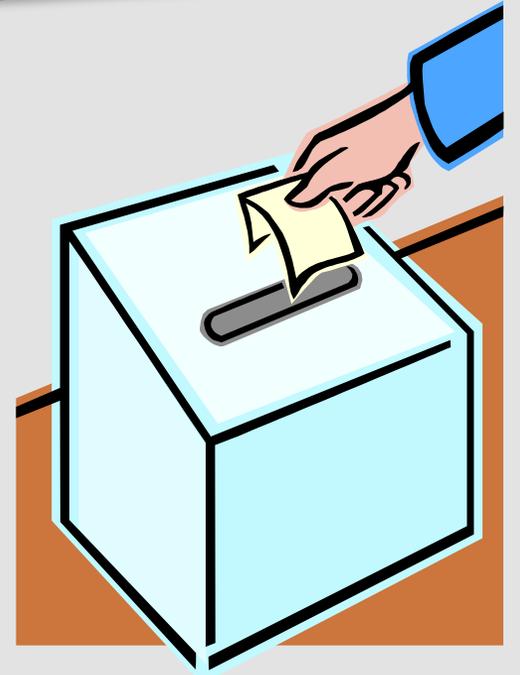
<https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-20211083.html>

CONSTITUTIONAL STATUS

- ❑ Constitutional *recognition*, not *protection*
- ❑ Abolition of tier of local democracy in 2014 by legislation
- ❑ Contrast with proposed Seanad Éireann abolition in 2013
- ❑ Lack of respect?

LOCAL ELECTIONS

- ❑ 25th set of local elections in May 2019 – 50% turnout
- ❑ Constitutional amendment in 1999, safeguarding five-year electoral cycle
- ❑ Between 1923 and 1999, fifteen postponements of local elections
- ❑ Number of seats determined by central government, not strictly proportionate to population
- ❑ Leitrim County Council has 18 members, 1:1780 citizens
- ❑ Dublin City Council has 63 members, 1:8800 citizens



MAYORAL ELECTIONS

- ❑ Elected by members of the council for a one-year term
- ❑ 40 members in Fingal County Council - Cllr Seána Ó Rodaigh
- ❑ Largely a ceremonial role
- ❑ DEM debate about five-year term with significant powers

POWERS AND FUNCTIONS

- ❑ Historically, Irish councils are responsible for a narrow range of functions
- ❑ Only minor responsibilities in areas like education, health, transport, policing and tourism
- ❑ Legislation in 2014 gave local authorities a more overt role in economic development
- ❑ Dead hand of centralisation; 38th out of 39 in International Local Autonomy Index
- ❑ Transfer of functions and powers – major part of Assembly's brief



FINANCE

- ❑ Very few countries spend less on local government than we do
- ❑ Local government spending as percentage of general government spending is around 8%; EU average is 23%; in Denmark it is over 60%
- ❑ Mixture of central government grants and local revenue sources
- ❑ Local sources (e.g. LPT) have been increasing but remain low by international standards



INTERNAL WORKINGS

- ❑ Councillors/elected members (part-timers) have reserved powers
- ❑ Chief Executive and staff have executive powers
- ❑ Councillors = policy; Executive = implementation and day-to-day administration
- ❑ Reality = partnership, e.g. planning
- ❑ DEM with executive powers = realignment?



CONCLUSION

‘Local Government in Ireland is more complex than might first appear to be the case. There are enormous weaknesses within the system, including lack of constitutional protection; low autonomy; few functions; political, administrative, functional and financial centralisation; increased managerialism; and the rationalisation of councils. Yet, in an individual, often uncoordinated way, local councils are playing innovative roles in economic development and policy formulation. Local authorities are also pushing the boundaries with a variety of democratic reforms aimed at enhancing policy making and policy analysis’

- ‘Ireland’s Unique Blend: Local Government and Policy Analysis’ in *Policy Analysis in Ireland*

**CINDERELLA MAY GET
A HAPPY ENDING!**

