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# Ireland
# Associational Democracy

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## Introduction               1

LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN IRELAND is local government in transition. Major changes of several kinds seem to have taken place in the past few years. If we are right, the character of sub-national government in the Republic of Ireland is changing completely. The process of change started in the 1990s (OECD, 1997). The Barrington Report and the governmental response to it, the 1996 Programme "Better Local Government - A Programme for Change", appear to have been of historical importance for the positioning of sub-national government. Previously, local government in Ireland was, to paraphrase Barrington, something to feel sorry for ("the sorry history of Irish local government"; 1991:164).[2] Sub-national government in Ireland was characterised by a lack of political and public support, was subordinated to central departments, had only limited responsibilities ('ultra vires' principle) and unclear structures. Through the current change programme, some of the necessary conditions are created for a more decentralised Irish government.

The aim of this chapter is not to give a comprehensive overview of Irish local government, but to investigate the nature of and developments in the relationship between citizens and local authorities. For this purpose, we will give a description of some basic features of local government in Ireland. We will discuss state tradi-

tion, the tasks of local government, their political structure, and the administrative structure at the local level. This description is a selective one. We will not discuss the long history of Irish local government, not being Irish ourselves ("There is an old joke that an Irishman can never answer a simple question without delving deeply into history"; Barrington, 1991:155). Following the literature on local government in Ireland, we will treat local governments as one body, although we are well aware that several different forms of local government exist (we will discuss differences as far as our knowledge allows). In the last sections, we will present some findings on the relationship between citizens and their local government.

To paint a picture of Irish local government, we will draw upon the (limited) literature on this subject, and discuss two case studies, those of city corporations of Dublin and Limerick. Six local government officials were interviewed (both politicians and civil servants; see appendix E).

## Local government in Ireland 2

### State tradition and the system of sub-national government 2.1

Ireland fits in the Anglo-Saxon state tradition (see chapter 1). The Irish system of local government originates from the pre-independence period, when Ireland was a part of the United Kingdom. The Irish system is, however, not purely British; the present-day system of sub-national government contains elements of the English model and elements that are purely Irish or that derive from non-English theory and practices. The managerial system, in particular, is modelled on local authorities in Bombay and the United States. Nevertheless, McManus (1993:28) concludes: "Despite this repudiation of English political control, the major influence on Irish political thought and practice has been British and this is manifested quite clearly in much of the local government system as it exists today".

During our interviews some of our respondents associated the weaknesses in traditional Irish local government with its British origin. They informed us that, as a result of the European integration and the intensified communication with local government officials in mainland Europe, they felt challenged by the image of relatively strong local governments in Northwestern Europe. One of our respondents explicitly mentioned his wish to convert to the consensual, participatory style he associated with the Northwest European tradition.

Speaking of an Irish 'system of sub-national government' is overstating things a bit, since the system has evolved haphazardly rather than been created: "lacking any philosophy of its role" (McManus, 1993). The Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898 created a two-tier-system, except in the county boroughs, which became all-purpose authorities. The structures of government that developed during the first fifty years after Irish independence, sacrificed local democracy in the interests of central control and bureaucratisation. The system that evolved, was based on a strong central executive with subordinate local authorities answerable to and financially dependent on the centre. As a result, Ireland had a highly centralised system of local government, at least until recently (McManus, 1993:31-33). It was only following a referendum in 1999 that constitutional provision for local government was included in Bunreacht na hEireann, the Irish constitution.

The major unit of local government is the administrative county, which is either a county borough or a shire county (McManus, 1993: 34). In addition to the institutions of local government, national government has installed a large number of regional and local bodies, some of which operate completely independently from local authorities, while others are linked to local authorities (fisheries boards, health boards, and he like). To make the picture even more complex, some national institutions have internal regional divisions of their own (OECD, 1997:216).

For a long time, the Republic of Ireland has known the ultra vires doctrine. In 1991, local government was reorganised (OECD, 1997:216). The principle of ultra vires was removed and a general competence provision enacted (OECD, 1997: 219). This development means that local authorities no longer need to seek specific legal authorisation for every single action. The second alteration contained in the 1991 Act was the establishment in the Dublin area of three new county councils, which replaced a county council and a borough corporation.

In response to EU-pressure for sub-national involvement in the Structural Funding processes eight regions were formally designated in 1994 and regional authorities were established. Their main function is to co-ordinate the provision of public services and monitoring and advising on the implementation of EU Structural Funds. The regional authorities consist of elected members of the constituent local government bodies (Quinn, 1999a:7). In 1999, in an effort to ensure that the poorer part of the country retained its eligibility for Structural Funding, Ireland was divided into two regions and Regional Authorities were created.

However, as the OECD (1997:215) report points out, there is, strictly speaking, only one level of directly elected local government in Ireland. The present day system of local government in Ireland is as follows (www.environ.ie):

- at county and city level there are thirty-four local authorities that form the mainline providers of local government services (twenty-nine county councils and five cities);
- at sub-county level there are eighty town authorities that fulfil a representational role and have a varying range of local government functions;
- at regional level there are eight regional authorities that co-ordinate some of the county/city and sub-county activities, and have a monitoring function with respect to the use of EU structural funds;
- there are two regional authorities, known as Regional Assemblies, which were established in July 1999 under new structures for regionalisation. The Regional Assemblies promote co-ordination of the provision of public services in the area, manage new regional operational programmes in the Community Support Framework 2000-2006 and monitor the general impact of all EU programmes of assistance under the CSF.

The supervision of local government performance has traditionally been the responsibility of the Department of Environment and Local Government. From a continental point of view this is strange: one would expect a Department of the Interior (or Domestic Affairs) to play this role. Not so in Ireland, a situation that is probably due to the specific tasks that local governments fulfil in this country (McManus, 1993:25). These tasks (see below) mainly concern the domain of urban planning and infrastructure. The Department was renamed the Department of the Environment & Local Government in 1996 reflecting a shift in emphasis.

### Local government tasks                                              2.2

Local authorities have legal autonomy. Most functions are assigned to county councils, and the power invested in town commissioners is said to be limited (OECD, 1997:219). Autonomy is, however, a relative concept. Firstly, local authorities are publicly accountable for their actions and must fulfil legal requirements for accounts, reports, and auditing. Local authorities are legally subject to financial and regularity audits by a corps of local government auditors that are

appointed by the minister of the Environment and Local Government. Secondly, as the OECD reports (1997:222), although each local authority has exclusive legal responsibility within its own functional area, some urban authorities are dependent on county councils, which provide some services that lie beyond the responsibility of counties. The Local Government Bill 2000 will provide flexible arrangements for co-operation of local authorities and joint service provision.

Surprisingly, although Irish local governments are multipurpose bodies, they carry no responsibility for areas such as education, health, civic defence, and social welfare; for this, special bodies exist. Irish local government is almost entirely confined to environmental infrastructure and some cultural activities (Barrington, 1991: 158). "Irish local authorities are environmental authorities concerned mainly with material matters" (McManus, 1993:37). The main responsibilities of local governments are:

- Housing and building
- Transport and road safety
- Water supply and sewerage
- Development incentives and control
- Environmental protection
- Recreation and amenities
- Agriculture, education and welfare
- Miscellaneous services.

For financial resources and expenditures, see appendix A.

Since 1991, many changes have been implemented to strengthen and modernise local authorities, giving them greater flexibility and independence of action, and ensuring that local government structures are meaningful to local communities, while, at the same time, being effective and efficient (OECD, 1997: 230). A large part of central control on local authorities has been removed: the control on land disposal, staffing, car parks, local authority procedures, personnel matters, and housing construction (OECD, 1997:219). On the basis of the process of renewal and repositioning of Irish local government, it may be expected that the set of tasks will widen. In the interviews we conducted, the hope was frequently expressed for a more encompassing local government that is able to show to its citizens what it is really capable of. The recently established County Development Boards will have responsibility for outlining a shared vision and preparing strate-

gies for economic, social and cultural development. They will thus contribute to the development of a wider definition of local government tasks. Issues such as neighbourhood renewal and urban planning are, in the modern circumstances, multidisciplinary and do not fall within the formal borders of policy sectors: some projects in Limerick and Dublin suggest that such a development is already underway.

### Political structure at the local level                                  2.3

Since it became independent, the Irish republic has had a system of proportional representation (McManus, 1993: 29), both at the national and the local level. At the local level, national political parties dominate, although some changes in this pattern can be observed (in some areas independent candidates get elected). Differences between the parties in terms of ideology and policy are scarce at local level. Councillors use a mixture of kinship, and religious, moral and other non-material benefits to ensure their support. Individual differences may be a deciding factor, since all candidates operate and compete on the same platform (McManus, 1993: 45-47).

Members of local councils are elected every five years. Councillors do not get any payment; in the 2000 Local Government Bill, however, provision have been made for the introduction of a regulated salary for councillors. In order to understand the roles that councillors play, the distinction between "reserved functions" and "executive functions" is important. Generally, reserved functions, which are defined by law, are decisions on important policy and financial matters. These functions can only be performed by elected politicians. Executive functions are all the non-reserved functions. The city manager is in charge of all executive functions. Elected members, however, do have some power which enables them to oversee the activities of the manager and give directions in certain circumstances. In turn, the city manager has a duty to advise and assist the elected members in the exercise of their functions (www.irlgov.ie/iveagh).

Council committees do not make executive decisions, as is customary in the British system, but, instead, tend to give advice to the manager and acquaint themselves with the manager's decisions and actions (McManus, 1993: 41).

Local authorities choose a Cathaoirleach (chairperson) and Leas-Chathaoirleach (vice-chairperson) from among its members at every annual meeting. Corporations and burrough corporations elect a mayor (as in Limerick and Dublin). At present, members of the national parliament[3] are disqualified from these offices (subsection (1)(c)). This rule will become redundant with the termination of the dual mandate (local and national) in 2004 (press release, 07/05/2000, www.environ.ie). From 2004 on, the Cathaoirleach will probably be elected directly by the voters. It is remarkable that the Irish chairperson/mayor does not really function as a political executive: as a part-time politician, his functions are very much of a symbolic and representative nature. In studying Irish local politics, it appears unwise to look upon the chairperson/mayor as a political leader.

In the Irish system, it seems impossible to really understand political positions without taking the city manager into consideration. Authors such as McManus (1993:34) conclude that the manager occupies a dominant position because of his full-time appointment whereas resources and information are denied to the unpaid councillors (although according to the OECD (1997:218), elected members have the pre-eminent role). Perhaps even more important is that the manager is the person who is in contact with the central departments; as such, he is the disseminator of national policies (see section d). The local political system, the natural counterpart of the city manager and 'his' local administration, is somewhat underdeveloped. Local politicians, including the mayor, work on a part-time basis only. There is no professional political executive (no daily board, no political leadership nor any direct supervision of sectors of the local administration). As a result, the council seems to lack influence. This is not only due to the distinction between reserved and executive functions described above, but also a result of the following practices:

- The absence of a political-administrative board implies that supervision of the performance of the local administration is only indirect and often based on information presented by the administration itself.
- There exists a non-hierarchical relationship between the council and the city manager (the council cannot dismiss the manager). Both parties (council and manager) are in a state of mutual dependency: the council has to negotiate with the manager.
- The council has hardly any information channels of its own, and depends heavily on the information it receives from the manager. There exists, of course, a right to information and inquiry, but the council seems to lack the professionalism, financial support, and facilities to exercise this right effectively.

▪ Although councils do have some informal instruments for influencing the manager, the perceived need for consensus and the low ideological level of political debate limit the effective use of these instruments.

Given this rather weak position of the local political institutions, it is remarkable that the position of the council, or even of local democracy, is not an issue in the minds of council members. Our respondents reported that local politicians seem to feel no need for change. They only observed some "haphazard initiatives". A possible explanation for this might be the fierce competition between individual council members and the perceived requirements for re-election: by being available, not getting involved in public scandals, and being visible, although not extremely so. There are some indications, which suggest that council members refuse to be visibly responsible, for the reason that they do not want to get blamed for governmental failures.

When talking about democratising Ireland, some respondents expressed the hope that local politicians will develop a stronger sense of responsibility for societal problems and issues. In order to realise this, politicians may have to learn to make better use of existing competencies, and need to develop an aspiration for more competence in general as regards local affairs.

In the official national government document "Better Local Government - A Programme for Change" (1996), which is a major renewal programme, launched by the minister of the environment (OECD, 1997: 233-234), some measures were proposed to strengthen local democracy. The position of local council members within the local government system has to be enforced: means to achieve this are, amongst others, the statutory recognition of the council members' policy-making role, reserving additional functions for councillors, and introducing a new system of annual allowances, etc. (OECD, 1997: 219).

Many councillors appear to resist the new ideas for strengthening local democracy. The concept of a directly elected mayor finds only little support and the growing power of area committees meets with distrust, in Dublin, for example. The Dublin area committees are official government bodies for five neighbourhoods, and consist of councillors from the neighbourhoods. They function as small corporations, with their own area manager and administration. The main reason behind the establishment of the area committees was the perceived

need to stimulate the city council to neglect minor issues ("parish pump issues") and focus on the more strategic issues on the agenda. A possible negative effect of the establishment of area committees is the fragmentation of city-level policies.

## Administrative structure                                         2.4

Local administrations can be characterised as management systems; the city and county manager occupy a central place (McManus, 1993:34). The observations we made in our interviews, both in Dublin and Limerick, are in accordance with McManus' findings. The city/county managers' official power is derived directly from statutory provisions.

The appointment of the manager is formally the responsibility of the county or the city council. However, the council has to appoint the candidate recommended by the Local Appointments Commission. If the council fails to do this, the recommended candidate will become manager automatically, after three months' time. The manager cannot be dismissed by the city council. In case of severe conflict, the only thing the council can do is ask the ministry for suspension of the city manager. Of course, as the head of the civil service, the manager has ample chance to make his mark on the local policy process (see below). The Local Appointments Commission is completely independent of local authorities. It is, however, connected to the central government: its members are usually the Speaker of the Dáil, and the Secretary of the Department of the Environment, as well as the Secretary of the Department of Health. The Commission deals with the appointment of people to chief executive, technical and professional posts. The Commission has also contributed to making public administration more non-political (McManus, 1993:42).

The number of staff is limited, and local departments are few. In 1993 (McManus, 1993: 40) the figures varied from 70 headquarters staff in Limerick County to 350 in Cork (see also the figures on public sector employment, table 5, OECD, 1997: 229). The staff requirements of local authorities are something for local managers to determine. In the case of officer grades however, the creation of offices requires the consent of the council and sometimes the approval of the Minister of the Environment (OECD, 1997: 229). A significant recent trend has been the emergence of agencies outside and independent from of the local government system (OECD, 1997: 232).

## Associational democracy 2.5

Ireland has a long tradition of community involvement. The 'bottom-up' approach has been adopted by many groups and associations in Ireland (Quinn, 1999b). Some are community driven or motivated by the opportunity to avail of EU funding (Community Development Projects, LEADER and FORUM groups, Pilot Programmes for Integrated Rural Development and Area-Based Partnerships, for example). Others are fostered by a change in the government's approach to development (Operational Programmes for Urban and Rural Development, County Enterprise Boards and County Strategy Groups).

The partnership model is introduced for county and city councils via strategic policy committees (SPCs; Local Government Bill 2000). They represent relevant sectoral/community interests. SPC chairs and the Cathaoirleach form a corporate policy group which must be consulted in preparation of the corporate plan and annual budget for submission to the council.

The various groups and associations have contributed significantly to the level of development and have emerged as an important feature of Irish social partnership. However, mechanisms were deemed necessary to co-ordinate the local development and local government processes. The objective of synergy was clearly articulated in The Report of the Task-Force on the Integration of Local Government and Local Development (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 1999). County and City Development Boards have been established during 2000, bringing together representatives from local government, local development, state agencies and social partners. The primary function of these new Boards will be to 'draw up a comprehensive Strategy for Economic Social and Cultural Development within the county/city and to oversee implementation of the Strategy' (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 1999:7). A Community Forum is also being established in each local authority area to act as a conduit for communication between the Development Board and the community and voluntary sector. This strategy has the aim and potential to integrate local government and local development but presents a challenge to the primacy of representative democracy in local government.

## Conclusion 2.6

Summarising, the picture painted of Irish local government is not one of strong politics:

1. Political actors with a broad view and capable of providing political leadership and inspiration seem to be lacking. The ability to represent the general interest seems only weak. We observed, however, that organised citizens and voluntary associations have no problem in finding ways to communi cate their views to the local administration. There is a marked tendency to involve these groups in the policy-making process either on an informal or a more institutionalised basis. Some elected politicians fear that this practice of "group consultation" may erode the representative system.

2. A participatory or associational democracy seems to be the inevitable conse quence of all this, and to be characterised by the involvement of organised interest groups instead of individual citizens. Strengthening this kind of involvement appears to be the local government strategy. More group involvement leads to better policy results, an increase in resources, ideas, etc. Local governments should, according to our respondents, "be at the heart of local developments". The external strategy is aimed at showing central government that local governments are capable of strategic policy making. There is a risk, though, of a decline of representative democracy in favour of associational democracy. The installation of Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), which consist in majority of councillors and have only a minority of representatives of interest groups, might have a counter-effect on this. Whether this effect will indeed become visible is yet unclear.

3. The political system seems to be dominated by the administrative system, and to be led by the powerful figure of the city manager. The absence of a profes sional political executive on the one hand and the strength of the manager's position on the other make the council weak when it comes to inforcing its views. Also, it is dependent on the civil service for policy information. The installation of SPCs could become an instrument for councils to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the city manager. SPCs can contribute to the development of an independent source of information for the council. Some respondents, nevertheless, observed that the councillors in the SPCs still depend on the city manager for information.

The observations listed above suggest that local government in Ireland has arrived at a stand-still and that there is little hope for development. This impression may prove to be false, however. During the last decade, efforts have been made to drastically change the face of Irish local government. Our observations, which are based on a limited number of interviews with civil servants and politicians, give reason to suppose that the effects of this strategy of renewal are still hard to see. Yet, most of our respondents seemed convinced that the desired change is just around the corner. They expressed a strong intention to create a situation in which local government really matters. The hope existed to stimulate citizens to develop an interest in local politics and government, and show the national government that there is good enough reason for stimulating the development of a true local autonomy.

## Local government-citizens relations 3

According to our respondents, the relationship between local government and citizens is weak and unemotional in Ireland. The involvement of citizens in local government is uninspired and infrequent, the latter perhaps being due to the small number of local government tasks. Citizens were reported to have no high opinion of (their) local government, probably as a result of the limited role it plays. Local government is something to complain or joke about in pubs. The citizenry do not assign much hope or passion to local politics and keep their distance. Of course, the usual contacts take place, in the political and electoral domain as well as in the administrative domain.

### The role of citizens 3.1

Local elections take place in multimember constituencies every five years. There exist no structures for direct democracy or local referenda. For active local communities, however, it is not difficult to make their views known to the individual councillors or the council (Barrington, 1991:169). In Limerick, we were informed about the custom of many elected representatives to personally visit the voters in their district, and offering help for finding solutions for grievances and problems. This is, of course, an electoral strategy, but it also can help to bridge the gap between the citizens and local authorities.

Public administrations do have contact with citizens or local interest groups, mainly on an informal or ad hoc basis (see above). Communication and consultation are facilitated both formally and informally, formally through various requirements for public notice of local authority proposals and decisions, and informally, through the local media (OECD, 1997:24) and a political-administrative culture that appreciates and stresses involvement of voluntary associations. There are a number of instruments available (OECD, 1997:224):

- There are legal provisions of formal public inquiries and consultation in specific areas, such as compulsory land purchase, motorway proposals and integrated environmental licensing; an arbitration provision and a nation al planning appeal board to contest decisions on physical planning made by local authorities.
- People can lodge formal objections at audit to which the auditor is obliged to respond.
- The public can inspect local authority accounts.
- There is a public right of access to certain environmental information.
- Citizens can lodge complaints about sub-national authorities with the Ombudsman (installed in 1985), with the exception of complaints about the reserved functions (McManus, 1993:48).

From the above, it can be concluded that the normal instruments for contact between citizens and local authorities are available. Nevertheless, contact with individual citizens seems to be mainly limited to solving individual problems, in which cases the citizen concerned are merely clients of the public sector. For the organised citizen, a different picture can be sketched (Barrington, 1991:169): active and organised citizens have no problem in making their views heard.

Our interviews in Limerick confirm this. In Limerick, the importance of the organised citizen was frequently cited. The local government of Limerick is used to involving all kinds of groups and voluntary associations in their communication structure. As an explanation for this tradition, local officials refer to the density of organisation in their community. Some of the Limerick officials we interviewed mentioned the continental style of "consensual and participatory democracy" as a point of reference.

In Dublin as well, the opportunities for citizens to make themselves heard seem to be readily available. Here the emphasis lies, however, not so much on associa-

tions but rather on individuals, which is probably due to the more individual life style one expects to find in a metropolitan area. The involvement of citizens is focused on their role as consumers of public goods. Most forms of renewal we were told about involved experiments with things like a more client-oriented style of the local administration and the decentralisation of service delivery to neighbourhoods. The contacts between citizens and local authority take place in an a-political, pragmatic and problem-solving atmosphere.

'Clientelism' seems to be a characteristic of the Irish system. It does have one positive effect; that of keeping public representatives informed about public sentiments and grievances. The survival of representatives depends on their being able to 'service' the constituents. This is a necessary counter-weight to increasing bureaucracy (Barrington, 1991:167).

## Developments in the relationship between citizens and local authorities                                                            3.2

Citizen-local government relations appear to be problematic to some extent. The website of the Department of the Environment and Local Government (www.environ.ie) states that, "despite extensive public consultation procedures, there has been a lack of participation and ultimately a lack of 'buy-in' by the public. The outcome has been that controversy often arises at planning application stage when the development plan has long been adopted by the local authority. This is obviously a cause for serious concern at many levels and one which needs to be addressed by a number of actions. The draft legislation on Planning will play a fundamental part in tackling these issues at a macro-level, but much can be done at an implementation and systems level to enhance the whole process."

One of the measures suggested by the 1996 Programme: "Better Local Government - A Programme for Change", is to increase the participation of local communities. An important instrument for enhancing participation is the so-called Strategic Policy Committee (SPC). SPCs are expected to offer "new forms of participation by local communities in the decision-making processes of local councils. A minimum of one third of the membership of each SPC will be drawn from sectoral representatives, giving sectoral interests and communities a clear input to local government policymaking". The hope

is that the SPCs, with their majority of city councillors, will assist the elected politicians in strengthening their position vis-à-vis the very powerful city manager. The SPCs may help to create new communication patterns, thus making councillors less dependent on information provided by the local civil service.

A relatively new development is that of democracy by electronic means: e-democracy. One of the wished-for effects of ICT is: "Enhancing local participation in the decision-making process (e.g. planning) by providing relevant information to the public in an easily understood fashion (e.g. pictures and maps, colour-coded presentations etc.; see website www.environ.ie)". A major proposed ICT-project focuses on e-democracy and public participation in the planning process through the use of technology (ICT Vision for Local Government: www.environ.ie). In the interviews, the respondents did not mention e-democracy. As a last important means of increasing participation of citizens, we mention the new framework provided by the 2000 Local Government Bill for local authority meetings with right of media attendance and public access.

### Conclusion 3.3

Irish local democracy and the relationship between citizens and local government in Ireland bear a somewhat unemotional, almost apathetic character. "Normal" citizens do not get involved in local politics and cherish little hope regarding its prospects. Efforts to improve the relationship between the local government and its citizens focus on improving the client- orientation of the civil service and involving the organised citizen in the process of policy-making (the latter mainly functioning as a source of information). Experiments with new forms of a more direct style of democracy, such as, for example, referenda and neighbourhood democracy, are scant and often viewed with mistrust by the political elite.

## Analysis and conclusion 4

Summarising the efforts toward renewal, one can observe that the process of repositioning Irish local government is aimed at satisfying two conflicting demands: democratic representation at the one hand and efficiency at the other. This situation already existed in the early nineties (McManus, 1993:50).

On the basis of the limited material presented above, we can very carefully draw some conclusions about the evolving relationship between citizens and local government:

a. The debate on improving the relationship between citizens and local government, as far as there is one, is not a very emotional one. The emphasis lies on the citizens' role as clients of public services. As far as we could observe, problems with respect to the other traditional role, that of citizens as voters, are hardly ever perceived.

b. Enhancing the legitimacy of local governments in Ireland means respecting and strengthening the representative democracy. This goal has little priority, however.

c. The focus is on efficacy, which explains the improvement of service delivery, and access for associations.

d. Initiatives come mainly from the national government and the local civil service and not, surprisingly enough, from citizens or local politicians.

e. Prior to the establishment of the County Development Boards and Strategic Policy Committees, and the proposed Community Forums, little attention had been paid to new forms of democracy in which the citizen is invited to participate actively and more directly in policy-making. The representative philosophy, in which the citizen's main role is that of voter, and the principles of new public management, in which the citizen is first and foremost a consumer of public goods, are the basic canons.

Perhaps the lack of emotion in the relationship between citizen and municipality and the lack of citizen involvement are caused by the small number of tasks local government has and the limited set of functions of the council. It could be argued that an increase in local autonomy is a necessary condition for an improvement in local democracy. Our observations show that Ireland still has a long way to go before a truly decentralised system of governance can be said to exist.

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1 The authors would like to thank Brìd Quinn for her support, advice and suggestions.

2 McManus (1993:51) quotes an even more dramatic Barrington: "Local government is like any historical ruin, something that we are perhaps reluctant to see removed wholly, but which we are prepared to see moulder away".

3 At the national level, Parliament (Oireachtas) consists of two chambers: the Dáil Aireann (House

of Representatives, the more important one) and the Seanad Aireann (Senate). The first is elected by adult franchise based on geographical constituencies (McManus, 1993: 29). The latter is composed in a, by Dutch standards, remarkable way. It is nominated by universities and other higher education institutions, by the prime minister (Taoiseach) and, in larger part, elected by a special electoral college consisting of members of the Oireachtas, county and county boroughs councillors (McManus, 1993:30). Remarkable as well is the fact that, constitutionally, Parliament consists of both the two Houses and the President (McManus, 1993: 29).