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Life Outside the Capital: Second-Tier but First Rate

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Commentary

"*Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody*" - Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities.

On 15 January 2015, the Irish Minister for the Environment and Local Government, Alan Kelly TD, announced the appointment of a statutory committee of experts to review the Cork city boundary and other local government arrangements, specifically the option of unifying the existing city and county structures. The minister spoke of the importance that both Cork city and county would not be held back in terms of economic progress, tourism, and development - the implication being that the current structural arrangements are an impediment to such development. That may well be the case but, in my opinion; structure is only one part of the story.

The primary impediment to progress is the local government system itself. Cork wants to become a strong, vibrant European metropolitan city region. Across Europe where you have strong metropolitan city regions, you invariably have strong local government with directly elected mayors, significant resources, autonomy from the center and responsibility for a wide range of functions including transport, policing, education and tourism. We have a tendency in Ireland to focus on micro-level debates on structure and form to such an extent that we miss the bigger macro-level issues. At no point do we step back and ask more fundamental questions like: What kind of local government system do we want in 21st century Ireland? What services should that local government system be providing? What is the role of the state? What is the optimal scale and scope of government? I believe if we are able to provide answers to these questions and establish first principles, then structures will follow more naturally.

The current local government administrative boundaries are outdated and make no sense for Corkonians and visitors alike. While other local authority jurisdictions have been granted boundary extensions, it is inconceivable that there has been no boundary extension in Cork for 50 years. The city clearly has outgrown its boundary and it is a source of frustration for citizens and tourists. Essentially, as demonstrated by the 2011 census, there is an enormous imbalance with a population of 399,802 in the county council jurisdiction and 119,230 in the city council jurisdiction. Even though there has been a population surge in the suburbs, the city's population has been declining. This creates a number of problems. One is that the people who live in the suburbs (and probably consider themselves to be in the city) are typically availing of the services of the city but paying a local property tax to the county.

A second problem is the perception of Cork as a small and insignificant player. Whether it is a business thinking of setting up in the city or a student considering studying in University College Cork, a Google search will reveal a city with a mere 119,000 people and a diminishing number at that. This is not a true reflection of Cork and the greater metropolitan area.

A modest boundary extension to encompass the suburbs would only represent Cork catching up for the past 50 years. What is needed is a more significant expansion to encompass a population of 270,000-300,000 which will serve Cork's needs for the next 50 years. This expanded area would put Metropolitan Cork in a more realistic position and a more competitive one in the company of appropriate cities and regions in terms of scale. It would also see Cork finally emerge as Ireland's leading second tier urban center. At the moment, Cork is not served by being placed in a group of second tier cities alongside Waterford, Limerick and Galway. Cork should have more ambition than this and not only look to offer a counter-balance to Dublin but also provide an alternative to Belfast for tourism and development.

Cork has many advantages which it is not presently exploiting. Recent research in the United Kingdom from citymetric.com shows that cities with airports tend to prosper as well as cities with a university around which research-focused companies can cluster. This research highlights that the biggest driver of growth is proximity to 'knowledge' – the cities that have thrived are those which have succeeded in attracting skilled workers and clusters of expertise, i.e. it is now human geography that drives growth [1].

Cork City Council is being pro-active on these issues and it hopes to promote the city as a global technology hub and a location for foreign direct investment. With this aim in mind, the council collaborated with Cork Chamber of Commerce, University College Cork, and Cork Institute of Technology to create the Irish Technology Leadership Group (ITLG), which brought the Silicon Valley summit to Cork in January 2013 and the event was heralded as an enormous success. An enormous amount of activity is taking place and collaborations between the local council, third level educational institutions and the private sector are especially strong. Cork is also seeking the status of 'smart city' and is in the process of developing innovative programs using digital technologies to optimize systems with the participation of city residents. This recognizes research by the European Commission which found that with the growth of smart city initiatives and programs it is important to have stronger resident participation as opposed to mere 'engagement'.

Furthermore, Cork City Council is taking a leading role in promoting the city on the international stage as an attractive location for tourists and visitors. As a 'city of festivals' Cork has assumed the mantle of a modern, vibrant and progressive urban center, a status underlined by its designation as European Capital of Culture 2005. Building from the successful Capital of Culture year, the City Council has continued to develop the city through substantial development in the public realm and through the active support of culture and the arts. This commitment has been matched by private sector investment in

the hotel, retail and hospitality sectors, increasing the capacity and appeal of the city for visitors.

At the close of 2009 the city's international appeal was recognized by its selection by the leading Travel Guidebook, Lonely Planet, as one of the 'Top Ten Cities in the world to visit in 2010'.

Interestingly, Lonely Planet referred to the 'Cork Metropolitan Area' as follows: -

'With a population of the Cork Metropolitan Area of four hundred thousand people and a huge investment into infrastructure Cork now has one million square feet of retail space in an easily accessible city centre. Cork also has some of the best restaurants in Ireland or England so this vote is not really a surprise to the people of Cork. Sophisticated, vibrant and diverse while still retaining its friendliness, relaxed charm and quick-fire wit, Cork buzzes with the energy of a city that's certain of its place in Ireland.'

Cork city is effectively a regional capital and is set to 'take off' as a tourism and business destination. In 2014, the city was judged to be the best small city for business friendliness by the Financial Times FDI Intelligence 'European Cities and Regions of the Future Report'. However, returning to my earlier point, this would happen in a more planned, coherent and sustainable way if the local government structures were changed to represent metropolitan Cork with a population of approximately 300,000 as opposed to a city confined by an outdated boundary with a declining population (and taxation base) of 119,000. With a strong local government system, an expanded boundary putting Cork in the company of appropriate cities and regions, and with control over functions such as transport and tourism, the future is bright.

To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, Cork city is currently an egg which must be hatched or it will go bad.

"*It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: It would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad*" C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (1952)

References

1. http://www.citymetric.com/business/why-do-some-cities-create-jobs-while-others-lose-them-846