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**‘The Cork Progressive Association and the Dissolution of Cork Corporation in 1924’**

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**Introduction – The Local Government (Temporary Provisions) Act, 1923**

The first major piece of legislation by the Irish Free State Government relating to local administration was the Local Government (Temporary Provisions) Act, 1923. Section 12 of this act gave the Minister for Local Government power to order an inquiry into the performance of any local authority, and, if he saw fit, to then transfer the property and powers of the authority ‘to any body or persons or person.’

During a committee stage Oireachtas debate on the legislation in February 1923, Minister Ernest Blythe had singled out Kerry County Council when he stated:-

In the case of county Kerry the Council has not met since June. There is no likelihood of its meeting. The administration of the county has been carried on by officials. Money has had to be actually paid out by officials. The rate collection is practically at a standstill; £74,000 is outstanding in respect of the years ending March, 1921, and March, 1922. Practically the entire rate for the year ending March, 1923, is still outstanding. Local administration in that particular case cannot be pulled together unless there are powers to appoint Commissioners to carry on the work of the local authority which has fallen to bits.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It was therefore no surprise when Kerry County Council became the first local authority to be dissolved on 9 May 1923. The elected members were removed from office and Philip Monahan, the young Mayor of Drogheda, was appointed as Commissioner.

Local authorities had suffered during the previous four years of war and it is true that some councils had stopped holding meetings and were not collecting rates. Accordingly, it can be argued that the 1923 legislation was necessary to restore order and discipline. Equally it can be asserted that there were political motives behind the legislation to curtail the activities of troublesome, anti-Treaty local authorities. During the committee stage debate on the bill, Deputy Darrell Figgis stated, ‘It is a power that one could imagine, under circumstances that do not prevail, could be very dangerously used.’[[2]](#footnote-2) Essentially, the needs of the time ensured a substantial intrusion by the central administration into local government.

Strict centralised control was deemed appropriate for a small, divided country with a new government seeking authority and respect – ‘The Ministers were more committed to restoring order, achieving efficiency and putting an end to suggestions of local corruption and abuse than they were to local democracy.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

It is only fair to assess the 1923 legislation and the drastic power of dissolution against the background of the time. The legislation was passed by ‘men of idealistic, often austere views who had been through a revolutionary experience and were progressing towards achieving independence after many attempts over the centuries.’[[4]](#footnote-4) The Free State government wielded the axe over local councils freely ‘and with breathtaking disregard of the antiquity and prestige of the victims.’[[5]](#footnote-5) The citizens of Ireland, tired after the bloodshed of the War of Independence and the Civil War, quietly accepted this anti-democratic measure.

**Cork Progressive Association**

Due to dissatisfaction with the conduct of local municipal affairs, the Cork Progressive Association (CPA) was formed in 1923. With John J. Horgan, a local solicitor, at the helm, the association soon became highly organised and attracted 450 members, drawn from local businessmen and disgruntled citizens. The association met on 13 August 1923 to discuss the forthcoming general election. Richard Beamish and Andrew O’Shaughnessy were nominated to stand for the election on behalf of the CPA. Beamish was a sitting city Alderman and local brewer, held in high esteem by the citizens of Cork. O’Shaughnessy was equally well known and respected as the owner of thirty creameries as well as the Dripsey and Sallybrook Woollen Mills. Thirteen CPA candidates stood for election in Cork city with five seats available. The CPA fought a clever campaign and astutely entered into an election pact with Cumann na nGaedheal. Beamish and O’Shaughnessy were elected, along with J.J. Walsh and Professor Alfred O’Rahilly (both Cumann na nGaedheal) and Mary McSwiney (Sinn Féin).

Buoyed by the success of their two Dáil candidates the CPA met on a weekly basis and the *Cork Examiner* carried reports of their meetings. Following through on their campaign promise to clean up Cork, the association passed a resolution in December 1923 calling on central government to hold an inquiry into local administration under section 12 of the Local Government (Temporary Provisions) Act, 1923. In particular, the association highlighted excessive rates and wasteful administration.

Throughout 1924, Horgan and the association maintained a strong campaign against the Corporation while also preparing candidates to run in the local elections. The *Cork Examiner* willingly provided a forum and editorials regularly supported the call for a public inquiry. These calls were intensified in March 1924 when an inquiry into the affairs of Dublin Corporation led to its dissolution two months later. Three Commissioners were appointed to run the affairs of Dublin city – Séamus Murphy, P.J. Hernon and Dr O’Dwyer.

The CPA and the *Cork Examiner* continued to lobby for a similar inquiry in Cork. The perception amongst citizens on Leeside was that Cork Corporation worked for political and sectional interests. Local elections were scheduled for 1924 but the government postponed them for a year as it feared localised pockets of political dissent. Cork Corporation was slowly disintegrating, with little public support and a number of resignations. In June, three prominent councillors – Liam Russell, Ann Sutton, Robert Day- resigned.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Eventually the intensive lobbying of the CPA yielded a result and Minister Séamus Burke ordered an inquiry. He appointed Nicholas O’Dwyer, B.E., Chief Engineering Inspector in the Local Government Department. Burke’s actions angered the members of the Corporation as they did not believe that an inquiry was necessary. Even before the inquiry began, Alderman Beamish – the newly elected Cork Progressive Association TD - stated that the decision had already been made in Dublin to dissolve the council.

**The Inquiry**

The sworn public inquiry commenced in the Cork Courthouse on Tuesday 26 August 1924 and lasted nine days. A Cork solicitor, H.P.F. Donegan, represented the Cork Progressive Association. J.F. Meagher, B.L. and Barry St. J. Galvin appeared for Cork Corporation. The proceedings had an explosive start as Inspector O’Dwyer quizzed Galvin on comments attributed to him in the *Independent* newspaper that the government had already decided that the Corporation was going out of office. Galvin had based his comments on the statement allegedly made by Beamish. Lord Mayor Seán French expressed the view that the government was merely trying to discredit the Corporation because a Republican had been chosen as the city’s first citizen.

Alderman Beamish, now a member of Dáil Éireann and a councillor in Cork for thirteen years, was the first person to present evidence. He delivered a damning appraisal of the Corporation’s performance:-

It is, therefore, clear that so universal an opinion of discontent throughout the city cannot arise without some serious justification, and the cause may be probably due to the feeling in the minds of the citizens that exorbitant rates have been raised, and when raised have been misapplied through unwise administration of such a nature that the citizens now desire that this form of administration should be immediately corrected, so that they may either secure the genuine benefits of high rates, or even the more reasonable advantages derived from a fair reduction of such rates.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Beamish then drew attention to an appointment to the staff of the Corporation which was based on nepotism rather than merit. The son of a councillor had been given a job but was repeatedly absent from work. The explanation given by the man for his absence was that his daily work could be performed in about ten minutes. Beamish admitted: ‘This appointment should never have been made.’[[8]](#footnote-8)

Sir Stanley Harrington, P.C., a member of the CPA was next to be sworn in to give evidence. He observed a ‘general discontent amongst the ratepayers at the very high standard to which the city rates had been advanced, and it was felt that the administration of the Corporation was not as effectively or economically done as might be.’[[9]](#footnote-9) He cited the poor condition of the roads and streets in the city and asserted that the quays were kept ‘in a most disgraceful condition of dirt.’[[10]](#footnote-10) Harrington recommended as follows:-

The Progressive Association are of the opinion that waste would be saved and greater efficiency obtained if the Corporation would either give their chief officials a much freer hand, or, better still, adopt the system of appointing a City Manager with full control – a system which is now practised with the best results in, I think, over 350 American cities. In other words, that up-to-date business methods should be employed in every department of the Corporation.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Following Harrington, the inquiry heard evidence from William Dinan, M.A., President of the Incorporated Chamber of Commerce and Shipping. Dinan stated:-

I would like to emphasise at once that I make no charge against the personal integrity of any member or official of the Corporation. The evils we suffer from are, in my opinion, inseparable from a system that appoints over fifty individuals to manage our Corporate affairs. A business that appointed fifty directors would be looked upon by businessmen as a joke.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The remainder of his testimony focussed, once again, on high rates and the appalling condition of streets. The rates theme was continued by James O’Donovan, a member of Cork Corporation from 1905 to 1920. O’Donovan’s evidence caused a stir when he outlined that he had been approached the previous Sunday by a councillor who threatened him and advised him to ‘be very careful’ about speaking against the Corporation.[[13]](#footnote-13) Under pressure from Inspector O’Dwyer and Meagher, O’Donovan revealed that the councillor was Stevey O’Riordan. At the time, councillor Riordan was on the list of the Corporation’s rate-paying defaulters. The first day of the inquiry ended with questions directed to the Town Clerk of the Corporation, William Hegarty.

The highlight of the second day of the inquiry was the appearance of Councillor Stephen O’Riordan. He admitted that he had met James O’Donovan and warned him to be careful. However he denied that this amounted to a threat. O’Riordan testified: ‘I have more honour in me than to use any physical force towards a man like him.’[[14]](#footnote-14) Regarding the issue of outstanding rates, O’Riordan explained that rates had been due for the period of March to September 1921. He was interned at this time and so was unable to pay but the debt had since been paid to the City Treasurer. The clash between O’Donovan and O’Riordan was an interesting sideshow, but did little to progress an inquiry intended to examine the administration of the Corporation.

Later in the day, Meagher cross-examined Alderman Beamish. Meagher did a good job in discrediting Beamish by highlighting that the Alderman had not attended a Corporation meeting since 1922. During 1921 Beamish attended four out of twenty-eight meetings. Beamish was also taken to task by Lord Mayor French who disputed much of the previous day’s evidence. In addition, French criticised the *Cork Examiner* for biased reporting of the inquiry and its anti-Corporation stance.

The following day French was on the attack again – this time criticising Inspector O’Dwyer for his uneven handling of the proceedings. In the afternoon, French formally presented his evidence. Unsurprisingly, he defended the members of the Corporation, saying that they were ‘sincerely doing their best.’[[15]](#footnote-15) They had laboured under exceptional difficulties during 1921 and 1922 and it had been impossible to achieve economies. According to French, the people of Cork were partly to blame:-

…… a real and serious attempt should be made to educate the citizens in local services and to instil in them an interest in local government bodies and generally in local affairs. This, to my mind, is the greatest drawback to public administration not only in Cork but all over Ireland. The citizens, not alone of Cork, but throughout the country, do not understand local affairs, do not give them the attention they should and if they did the result would be an all-round improved administration.[[16]](#footnote-16)

There was a chaotic end to the day’s proceedings. Sir John Scott, a Corporation member who had been constantly interrupting the inquiry with comments, sought an apology from Beamish who referred to him as the ‘Clown of the Circus.’ Beamish responded in typical fashion:-

The definition of the term ‘clown’ may be taken as a member of society who interrupts the several performances by the interjection of remarks, sometimes amusing, and sometimes silly, as the case may be. Sir John, by his continued interjections, at times amusing, and at times silly, has also interrupted this inquiry many times. With such facts before us it is impossible for me to withdraw the honour of granting him the last title to which he is entitled amongst the many others which have been showered upon him.[[17]](#footnote-17)

An outburst of cheering and excited comment came from the public gallery as Scott and Beamish traded insults. Inspector O’Dwyer adjourned the proceedings until the following morning. The inquiry was indeed in danger of turning into a circus.

The remaining days of the inquiry followed a similar pattern and Lord Mayor French was aggressively cross-examined by Donegan for the best part of three days. In particular, Donegan probed in detail the appointment of relatives of Corporation members. He also challenged the contract awarded to Coughlan Brothers for the building of the Tuckey Street temporary library. Coughlan Brothers was owned and run by Charles Coughlan, an Alderman in Cork Corporation (who had, in fact, no brothers).

On ethical grounds, such a contract should not have been awarded to a sitting councillor who stood to gain financially from the venture. Even though Coughlan submitted the lowest tender – in the amount of £786 – an extra payment of £800 was made to his company due to a design alteration.

Mayor French was adept at parrying Donegan’s questions, offering short, curt replies. He stressed that the Tuckey Street contract was awarded to Coughlan Brothers and not to Councillor Charles Coughlan and so there was no impropriety involved. Frequently, French claimed insufficient knowledge to answer questions, instead advising Donegan to speak to the City Treasurer, Town Clerk or City Solicitor. Finally, in exasperation, Donegan directed a very blunt question to French: ‘Can you, as Lord Mayor, point to anything done by this Corporation for the benefit of the city that you are proud of?’[[18]](#footnote-18) French replied as follows:-

We have been up against abnormal times, and it is unreasonable to expect that we could settle down absolutely immediately as if nothing had happened. The work of the Corporation is being done absolutely honestly.[[19]](#footnote-19)

On the ninth day of the proceedings, Saturday 6 September, after many petty exchanges and point scoring, Inspector O’Dwyer ended the inquiry. Both sides were given an opportunity to make closing arguments. Representing Cork Corporation, Meagher rejected the accusations of nepotism and jobbery. He argued:-

Touching the number of relatives of members employed in the Corporation they amount to something like a dozen or, at most, fifteen. Considering the fact that there are fifty-six members of Council, or nearly that number, it does not seem to me that twelve or even fifteen relatives of some of them is an over big proportion.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Meagher also asserted that the contract awarded to Coughlan Brothers reflected no discredit on the Corporation.

**Jobbery**

Needless to say, Donegan interpreted things differently during his final remarks. Apart from the appropriateness of the contract given to Coughlan, he pointed out that at least four close relatives of the Alderman were employed by the Corporation. Their total combined pay amounted to nearly a penny on the pound on the rates. Donegan then listed other relatives of Council members employed by the municipal authority.

* Sir Edward Fitzgerald – Relatives working in Fitzgerald’s Park and in the Cemetery as well as a son in the Harbour Board.
* Councillor Jerry Kelleher – Three sons in the Harbour Board and a sister-in-law employed as a caretaker in Fitzgerald’s Park (despite the existence of another caretaker).
* Councillor Gamble – A son in the Port Sanitary Authority.
* Councillor Mahony – A son in the Public Health Department.
* Councillor M.J. O’Riordan – A daughter in the Corporate Office.

Donegan declared:-

I don’t hesitate to describe all this as jobbery of the worst kind. I say the whole system is rotten to the core. It is simply nepotism and favouritism carried to the utmost extent so that no one without influence in the Corporation has a dog’s chance of getting anything.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In closing the inquiry, Inspector O’Dwyer paid tribute to the citizens of Cork for attending in large numbers throughout the nine days. He said it was now his unpleasant duty to write a report for the Minister, knowing that his document could not please everyone.

It came as no great surprise when O’Dwyer’s report to Minister Séamus Burke was couched in negative language, just like his report into the affairs of Dublin Corporation a few months earlier. Although O’Dwyer did not make a strong recommendation for dissolution he was highly critical of Cork Corporation. He noted that out of a total street mileage of sixty-eight within the city, approximately five miles were suitably surfaced. He also stated that the method of allocating houses was unsatisfactory:-

A number of lettings appear to have been placed at the disposal of the representatives of each ward and they selected their tenants in accordance with whatever set of qualifications appealed to them personally.[[22]](#footnote-22)

**Unsurprising Verdict**

Burke was only ever going to make one decision and inevitably he found against Cork Corporation. On 30 October, the administrative Head of the Local Government Department, E.P McCarron (as a former Local Government Board official his appointment had been controversial) wrote to the Town Clerk of the Corporation. McCarron’s letter explained that the Minister had given careful consideration to O’Dwyer’s report and that the facts disclosed proved beyond question that the duties of the Corporation had not been effectively discharged. The letter noted:-

The Minister does not think it would serve a useful purpose to enter into a consideration of the reasons for this failure. The citizens are under obligation to those of their representatives who have rendered disinterested services, and none the less because individual efforts may not have been attended with success. The health of the citizens is greatly imperilled by laxity in sanitary administration, especially as regards delay in providing a pure water supply. Furthermore, the general financial position has become most unsatisfactory, while the rating burden is abnormally high. It is clear to the Minister that that a temporary change of control of a very definite character is essential, as many urgent problems vital to the well-being of the community must be dealt with at once. It is necessary that there should be brought to their solution an absolute impartiality, and an understanding of modern developments in city management. That the dissolution of the ancient Corporation is involved is a matter of regret. The Minister hopes and believes it may be possible very soon to re-establish the management of the city on a suitably representative basis.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The Cork and Dublin dissolutions significantly altered the landscape of local government in Ireland. The County Councils in Offaly, Leitrim and Kerry had been suspended with the guarantee of reinstatement once the threat of insolvency was removed, but no such assurances were given to the Corporations in Cork and Dublin.[[24]](#footnote-24) There is no doubt that the dissolution of these two prestigious local authorities was part of a bigger plan by W.T. Cosgrave and E.P. McCarron to create a technocratic and de-politicised local government system.[[25]](#footnote-25) During a subsequent speech to the Cumann na nGaedheal Annual Convention on 13 May, 1925, Cosgrave stated:-

The meeting of the local authority is not the place for discussions of political issues. In the past these questions were indeed obtruded – to the disadvantages of local administration, but there was an excuse in the absence of a national assembly where they could properly be dealt with. The Oireachtas, the sovereign assembly of the nation, is now available to settle such matters.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The respected Irish local government scholar, Mary E. Daly, argues that this determination to divorce local government from national issues was an appropriate, if idealistic, ambition for Ireland at that time.[[27]](#footnote-27) Whether appropriate or not, the dissolution of Cork Corporation was not deserved. The Corporation was not performing effectively and Donegan had done an excellent job at the inquiry of highlighting some mal-administration, jobbery and nepotism. However, no evidence of corruption was produced at the inquiry and little attention was paid to the turmoil which had been visited on the city during the previous years of war. Administration was less than perfect, but dissolution was a drastic and unwarranted punishment. The large public attendance throughout the inquiry demonstrated a sense of civic responsibility amongst Cork citizens and, except for the government’s decision to postpone the 1924 local elections, the people of the city could have offered their own verdict on the performance of the Corporation and its members at the ballot box. Administrative reforms might also have been introduced and there would have been merit in substantially reducing the number of elected councillors from fifty-six to a level which would facilitate more efficient decision-making.

Minister Burke’s decision was a political one which maintained the trend towards centralisation and the loss of local autonomy. This author supports the view that the decision to dissolve Cork Corporation was taken prior to the commencement of the sworn public inquiry. Philip Monahan was sent to Cork on the basis of O’Dwyer’s report which was written following an inconclusive, and often petty, inquiry.

Thus began Monahan’s relationship with Cork, a city which would become synonymous with him in the years ahead. An article in the journal *Administration* describes his transition from Kerry to Cork in the following terms:-

The Lord Protector was taking over. It was the end of a chapter, for while Kerry County Council and the rest that had fallen to him would regain for a good period their full powers, the Cork City Council never would.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The reference to ‘the rest that had fallen to him’ is an interesting one because by the end of October 1924 as well as Cork Corporation, Monahan had taken over responsibility for the West Cork County Board of Health, the Cobh Urban District Council and the South Cork County Board of Public Assistance.

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