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**‘Cranks and Idealists: The Emergence of the Planning Profession in Local Government Following the Local Government (Planning and Development) Act, 1963’**

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**Cranks and idealists: the emergence of the planning profession in local government following the Local Government (Planning and Development) Act, 1963**

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**Author Profile**

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**“The idea is now being accepted that proper planning is an economy rather than the reverse. Previously, planning was regarded with considerable suspicion and was regarded more as something for cranks and idealists.”**

- Lionel Booth TD, Second stage Dáil Debate on Local Government (Planning and Development) Bill, 31st January 1963

Much attention has been paid to the role of elected members (i.e. councillors) in spatial planning in Ireland, though regrettably this has tended to focus on clientelism and abuse (e.g. Komito, 1985; Kitchin et al, 2010; Scannell, 2011; An Taisce, 2012). While Scott (2008) has studied perceptions of planners in debates regarding one off rural housing and rural development, the role of planners (the professional “cranks and idealists” in planning authorities tasked with implementing planning legislation) is less researched and understood. This paper discusses the emergence of the planning profession in Irish local government following the Local Government (Planning and Development) Act, 1963. It suggests that the low numbers of professional planners working in local government at the time of the commencement of the Act undermined planning’s effectiveness and acceptance. It argues that this continues to have implications for public and political trust in the “planner” today, compounded by a lost generation of early development plans made with limited professional planning input.

## **The Planning Profession and the Planning Function**

Firstly one must understand the role of planners and the “separation of powers” in the planning system that governs their work.

Planners work in the public, private, academic and voluntary sectors in a variety of roles and as self-employed consultants. With a wide range of skills, they advise decision-makers (such as national and locally elected democratic bodies), communities, investors, interest groups, business people and the public at large on issues to do with the spatial development, growth, management and conservation of regions, cities, towns, villages, neighbourhoods, local areas and parcels of land everywhere. Their primary function is to plan: to envision sustainable futures for places and to work in partnership with others in bringing about change in meaningful and effective ways (Irish Planning Institute, 2014).

The making, reviewing and varying of the plan is a function reserved for the elected members of the planning authority under Ireland’s local authority management system. It is their duty to adopt the plan with the technical help of their officials (the chief executive, planners, engineers etc.), following extensive public consultation.

All decisions to grant or refuse planning permission are taken by the relevant planning authority and then, if there is an appeal of the decision, by An Bord Pleanála. After reviewing and integrating information from across local authority departments and considering the results of site visit guidelines, plans and policies, the planner recommends a decision and a written report outlining the reasons is presented to the chief executive who reviews it and decides whether permission should be granted or refused (this power is frequently delegated to a senior official such as a director of service).

In this paper “professional planner” refers to graduates of professionally accredited third-level planning programmes who are generally members of a professional institute. It is important to note that the title “planner” is not protected like that of “architect” for example, meaning that others may offer planning services or describe themselves as “planners” while not being trained in the discipline or members of any professional planning institute. In local authorities non-planners often work in a variety of roles in planning departments, including offering planning advice and making planning recommendations. The term “planner” is not defined in Irish planning legislation (instead “the planning authority” is referred to, though there are some general references to the role of planners in preparing certain reports or conducting certain activities in ministerial guidelines issued under Section 28 of the legislation).

## **Planning Comes of Age**

The Local Government (Planning and Development) Act, 1963 has been described as when planning “came of age” and became a distinctive discipline in Ireland. However when the Act came into force in October 1964 there was no full time planning course in the country. Up to that point there was little demand for town planners and few people qualified, this is despite the existence of planning legislation dating to 1934 and 1939.

The 1934 Act allowed local authorities to give themselves planning powers by drawing up a “planning scheme” to guide development if they so wished. The 1934 legislation was of its time. Few people had even heard of town planning, concepts such as ecology were unknown and the countrywide local authority management system did not exist. Apathy was evident from the beginning. Local authorities were invited to make comments on the 1933 Planning Bill but none did so.

The 1939 amending legislation was intended to make the process for adopting a planning scheme more straightforward but by 1952 only seventeen of the twenty-seven county councils had adopted the planning acts and by 1963 forty-four county, borough and urban district councils had passed a resolution to make a planning scheme for their planning districts while three counties still had not done so along with twelve urban district councils (including eight from County Cork). This may be somewhat attributed to the complicated planning scheme procedure, limited technical skills and lack of political or public impetus as well as the slow pace of development in the period (Grist, 2013, p. 2). There was little departmental expertise or training in planning under the 1934 Act with the aids to planning authorities consisting of a booklet of “model clauses” and a circular about the siting of petrol stations (Nowlan, 1989, p. 74).

The planning scheme system was seen as unfit for the ambitious 1960s. The Local Government (Planning and Development) Bill was introduced to the Dáil on 12th July 1962 by the Minister for Local Government, Neil T. Blaney. The second stage commenced on 12th November and the Act cleared both houses of the Oireachtas on 31st July 1963. It was signed into law on 7th August 1963 and was to have effect from 1st October 1964. While preparing the Bill department officials drew on professional bodies and local authority officials, in particular the officials of the Dublin and Cork Corporations where planning departments were in place. The Bill was also developed with input from the United Nations that looked at planning in the United States but it was ultimately modelled closely on 1947 UK legislation.

The 1963 Act was heralded with a great deal of hope and hype. MacLaran and Punch (2004, p.18) describe it as representing the “optimistic and expansionist spirit of the age”. For Frank McDonald (1985, p.4) the Act was to sweep away “bureaucratic cobwebs” in a new era of positive planning.

Those who would implement the legislation “on the ground” were considered during its passage through the Oireachtas but generally only in negative terms.

In a debate on the Bill Deputy Patrick Hogan (1963) suggested that it would lead to local authority officials becoming “tinpot planners” and it had a “dictatorial flavour which I completely deprecate. It was said here today that dictators make the best planners. Certainly, I suppose, they make the most effective planners. One may ask oneself do planners become dictators. I think the answer would be that the tendency is definitely so.”

It was suggested that planning experts might overshadow the role of local councillors as elected representatives of the people, a suggestion strongly refuted by Minister Blaney. Deputy Hogan (1963) warned “who has served on a public authority knows how relatively ineffectual public representatives are. The authority will, in practice, be the county manager and his assistants, working in close conjunction with the higher officials in the Custom House [where the Department of Local Government responsible for planning policy was based].”

Deputy Lionel Booth was more positive however, admitting “Previously, planning was regarded with considerable suspicion and was regarded more as something for cranks and idealists. Now it is being accepted as a realistic policy to have wholehearted long-term planning.”

Despite this breakthrough in perception, limited consideration was given to how many trained cranks and idealists might be needed to operate the system and when they would be put in place. For Blaney (1962) planning was a “necessary, continuous and co-ordinated process directed towards the good of the community. To advise on the principles and measures necessary for the proper co-ordination of development is the function of the planner”.

## **Cranking Up**

All local authorities (except town commissioners) were granted planning powers when the 1963 Act came into force. Creating one central planning authority was not entertained. However it was argued at the time that there were too many planning authorities and it spread the already scarce available expertise even more thinly. Planning authorities were required to prepare and adopt development plans for their areas on or before October 1967, but “for a country with a lack of a planning tradition, or adequate technical staff, this was a daunting task” (Bannon, 1983, p.123).

Most of these new planning authorities had to establish and staff planning departments, while even Dublin with a longer planning tradition, struggled to meet the requirements of the new legislation.

Outside of the cities of Dublin and Cork county engineers - most of whom knew little or nothing about planning - were allocated the role of providing planning functions. This was despite Minister Blaney’s (1963) somewhat lukewarm assertion that “the importance of planning in local government is such that I think we must look ahead to the time when local authorities or groupings of local authorities will employ qualified planning advisers or the chief professional officers will have planning qualifications. Indeed I envisage that in due course the possession of a qualification in planning will become at least a desirable qualification for the top technical posts.”

What would now be described as “capacity building”, though limited, did take place. An Taisce gave a lecture to county managers, county engineers and planning officers on nature conservation in the context of the Act at a Town and Country Planning Symposium. Senior local government officials from every local authority attended an “appreciation course comprising lectures by the President and other leading personalities” of the Irish Branch of the Town Planning Institute to explain “the purpose and methods of planning” (O’Leary, 2014, p.87). A travelling roadshow of senior Department of Local Government officials and UK consultants toured the country to brief and “sell” planning to the elected members.

In May 1964 An Foras Forbartha (The National Institute for Physical Planning and Construction Research) was established to “undertake research into and provide training in and advance knowledge of the physical planning and development of cities, towns and rural areas.” An Foras Forbartha participated in the preparation of a provisional plan for Galway city, with the plan acting as a “dress rehearsal for the development plan”.

## **Understaffing**

The strains of developing a planning department and completing a plan were quickly felt. Shortly after its commencement the Association of Municipal Authorities of Ireland sought grants for planning authorities to alleviate the cost burden imposed on them by the Act.

In July 1963 the Minister told the Dáil that he was conscious of the need for planning training and research and that “in order to augment the overall supply of qualified planners I have secured the cooperation of the Dublin Vocational Education Committee—for which I am most grateful—in providing a two-year post-graduate course in planning for suitably qualified architects, engineers and surveyors” (Blaney, 1963).

Blaney (1963) saw a survey of the existing area as a key part of developing a plan. However with a mindset which may have undermined the profession from the outset, he foresaw a limited role for planners in this, telling the Dáil “needless to say, much of the preparatory work for a development plan can be undertaken by persons who are not qualified planners. Extensive use can clearly be made of the professional and administrative skills which are found in every local authority establishment.”

Understaffing persisted. Many planning authorities, most notably Dublin Corporation, failed to meet the October 1967 deadline for the completion of what were termed the “Mark I” development plans. Their draft plan was published in 1967, generated 7,000 objections and was not approved until 1971 (O’Leary, 2014, p.94).

In the Dáil concerns were expressed to Minister for Local Government Kevin Boland about the “grave understaffing in the planning department of Dublin Corporation” which might affect its ability to deliver the plan required under the 1963 Act, with Deputy Michael O’Leary (1967) saying Dublin’s “planning staff is ludicrous in comparison with the planning staffs in British cities with populations of a similar size. This is an unfair burden”.

According to Frank McDonald (1985, p.62-63) most members of the public who viewed the 1967 Draft Dublin Development Plan “came away thoroughly confused by all the coloured zonings maps that the planners had to put together to meet their statutory obligations” though for McDonald the fact that a draft development plan “was produced at all was something of a miracle” as “the new Act imposed enormous responsibility on the local authorities yet, when it was being processed through the Dáil, there were no more than a dozen qualified town planners in the whole country and crash courses had to be laid on in Bolton Street to make instant planners out of a motley collection of architects, engineers and surveyors. The Corporation’s own planning department remained seriously undermanned throughout the 1960s and the harassed staff, operating out of a cramped old building Christchurch Place, were barely able to cope with the day-to-day flow of planning applications – never mind draw up a comprehensive development plan for the city.”

It was almost a decade after the Act that (unimplemented) local government reforms first advocated creating a planning and development officer as head of a planning and development team in each authority. This would have formalised the recognition of a planner’s professional skills and offered a career structure to planners.

The shortage of professional planning expertise had significant consequences. The bulk of time and limited resources was put into service in development control rather than forward planning and it meant early development plans were of varying quality. The vesting of planning functions in engineering staff as an interim measure quickly became the status quo in places.

For Bannon (1989, p.10) the absence of a planning profession was a source of conflict with the government’s emphasis on planning for economic expansion as the profession that developed was heavily drawn from the design professions “which all too often saw planning as a regulator”.

A survey of the city corporations and county councils carried out in August 1983 by the Irish Planning Institute found that there were 131 planners employed within these authorities. As fifty-five of these were employed within the Dublin authorities, this left just seventy-six planners for the remainder of the State. In many cases the planning department was a one person operation and lacked resources.

This issue of resources was highlighted in two An Foras Forbartha studies in the 1980s. The first (Grist, 1983), a review of the first twenty years of planning since 1963, stated “The number of qualified planners currently employed in planning authorities is not sufficient to allow staff time to talk to applicants and elected representatives without the occurrence of delays in the assessment of other planning applications.”

The second study (Grist, 1984) examined the preparation of development plans. It found that in almost half of all cases where an extension of time was sought from the Minister for the preparation of a new development plan the reason given for the delay was “staffing difficulties”. Not surprisingly, in the same study the suggestion most favoured by the planning authorities in order to improve development plan preparation was “improving manpower levels to ensure some staff can work on development plans full-time.”

## **Planning Institute**

In 1936 the influential Irish born and Eton educated planner Manning Robertson (1936, p.33) called for more to be done to ensure planning was seen as a distinct profession in Ireland, saying this required a high quality town planning course, of a standard equivalent to those in architecture, engineering and surveying and suggesting “we should have in mind the ultimate formation of a Town Planning Institute of Ireland.” This took almost another forty years although the UK Town Planning Institute had a presence in Ireland since the 1940s.

The first planning school was set up in Bolton Street offering a Diploma in Town Planning. The need to provide a full time university course led to the establishment, in University College Dublin (UCD) in 1973, of a two year Diploma in Town Planning course, which was later developed in 1979 into a Masters degree in Regional and Urban Planning, while Queens’ University Belfast also had a two-year diploma course, also later developed into a Masters course.

At the time the Town Planning Institute’s Irish Branch, which consisted largely of planners who had passed the Institute's external examinations or had studied planning in the UK, did not accept the UCD qualification. Partly as a result of this lack of recognition, and partly out of a desire by DIT and UCD graduates to have a recognised and separate Irish professional planning institute, separate from the UK body, Irish planners in the early 1970s investigated the establishment of an Irish institute to represent the interests of current and future graduates and the profession as a whole.

These planners, led by planners working at the time in central government, came together with another group of planners, generally consisting of those working in local authorities, the Association of Physical Planners of Ireland, to form the Irish Planning Institute, which was formally established in November 1975 with Patrick Shaffrey as its first President and Bernard Muckley as its Secretary (Caffrey et al, 2013). The Association of Physical Planners had been set up to pursue issues with the Minister for Local Government, local planning authorities and educational bodies around the training and employment of planners. Further professional planning degree courses were established in DIT in 2001 and in University College Cork in 2006.

## **Consequences**

The most immediate consequence of understaffing was the mixed quality of the first development plans and the long terms implications this may have for the development of planning authorities’ areas. There are also project level examples of where the early exclusion of the profession compounded negative outcomes. Ballymun has been referred to as the “state's worst planning disaster” (McDonald, 2000, p.251) though “it is arguable as to whether planning was involved at all” (Power, 2000, p. 211). For architectural historian Ellen Rowley (2014), architects were kept at the periphery of the housing debate that drove the development of Ballymun at the time, with cost concerns predominating. The same could continue to be said of the emerging planning profession. This contrasts with the new town of Shannon which was developed almost contemporaneously by Shannon Free Airport Company (SFADCo). Essentially a private undertaking, Shannon was developed with the input of professional planners and avoided much of the social exclusion issues associated with Ballymun though both were built within the urban design principles of the time.

Reflecting on the state of the profession in an edition of Pleanáil – The Journal of the Irish Planning Institute marking the tenth anniversary of the Institute in 1985, its president Feargall Kenny questioned why planners were not yet the dominant force in the planning and development process as “instead the running is being made by others; politicians, semi-state bodies, entrepreneurs, Monsignor Horan [key agitator for development in the West, especially Knock airport], Tony Gregory [inner city advocate] et al” (1985). Kenny attributed this to the failure of planners to assert themselves and present the objectives and achievements of the profession positively. For the profession the Tribunal of Inquiry Into Certain Planning Matters and Payments’ (Mahon Tribunal) later investigation of planning activity at this time was seen as vindicating planners who recommended refusal of many ill-considered zonings against political pressure and no professional planner was found to be corrupt.

For reasons partly attributable to understaffing, the 1963 Act disappointed many and the initial under resourcing of the system it put in place created apathy and reinforced negative views of planning and planners. This has persisted and has manifested itself in mistrust and sometimes aggression.

In his book Landscape and Society in Contemporary Ireland Brendan McGrath (2013, p.4) recalls “the torrent of verbal abuse” he received from a family while working as a planner in Clare County Council when he told them that their son’s preferred site on their family farm was unsuitable for a house for landscape, public health and environmental reasons while other, more suitable, sites were available. McGrath found this surprising not least because they had been friendly acquaintances but also because they had campaigned against the development of the Burren visitor centre on landscape grounds. In 2005 a local authority planner was assaulted in a nightclub by a developer whose marina development was refused permission. The developer, who had previously superglued himself to the local authority’s doors in protest at a planning refusal, told the planner “you’ve interfered in my life and you don't like me interfering in yours now do you?”(Irish Independent, 2006).

An atmosphere was created where questioning the professionalism and competence of planners was acceptable and politically popular. In a Dáil debate on the Planning and Development Bill, 1999 Denis Naughten TD complained that the “latest planning officer” in his electoral area was “only just out of college and when she is making a decision on whether to grant planning permission, she refers to her text book. It is not acceptable for somebody just out of college to have the responsibility of a planning officer and to use a text book to decide whether to grant planning permission or to decide the conditions she will impose.” In 2011 the Irish Citizens Party manifesto declared “Planners were generally trained in England…As the cultures of England and Ireland are fundamentally different, many of the tensions that exist in planning in Ireland have their origins in the training of Irish planners according to the English model”. This conveniently ignores the presence of three planning schools in the Republic of Ireland but highlights ongoing mistrust.

## **Conclusion**

First president of the Irish Planning Institute Patrick Shaffrey wrote in 1985 that “twenty-two years since the Planning Act was passed, most major local authorities do not employ a planner in a chief officer status, even though planning matters are now among their most important concerns”, concluding that the built environment at the time was not as good as it should be and “future historians may partly attribute this to the lack of professional planning inputs at the highest levels.” The number of professional planners employed in local authorities and the private sector increased during the 1990s and early 2000s but early suspicions, some unmerited but some reinforced by delays and poor quality development plans brought about by understaffing, persisted.

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