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Politics, people and public policy: Case studies in policy engagement

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Introduction

This paper introduces a special issue of *Administration*, which brings together a number of papers delivered at the Martin McEvoy Annual Conference in the School of Law and Government in Dublin City University in December 2020. The aims were twofold: first, to offer a forum for discussion and debate on the current approaches to, and potential trajectories of, public engagement in the public policy cycle; second, to facilitate meaningful engagement by citizens, communities, public representatives, public and civil servants, civil society organisations, research students and academics to examine the challenges of public engagement. In this context, the conference organisers were particularly keen to bring together both academic and practitioner perspectives on public engagement in policymaking processes and institutions, and were very satisfied by the number of papers submitted by serving politicians and public servants and the robust and constructive exchange of views on the day.

There are a variety of instrumental and developmental rationales for engaging the citizens of a locality, community of interest, region or state in policymaking processes. These can range from consolidating

and strengthening democracy (Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007) to providing a mechanism to educate citizens about citizenship and its opportunities, challenges and responsibilities (Mill, 1861/1972), to facilitating opportunities for citizens to exercise their voice about policy choices (Katsonis, 2019), to building institutional bridges between government and citizens (McInerney & Adshead, 2010). Depending on the underpinning rationale, or rationales, public engagement can involve citizens in policymaking activities at a variety of stages in the policymaking process, including (a) agenda setting, (b) policy formulation, (c) legitimation, (d) implementation, (e) evaluation and (f) policy maintenance, succession or termination (Knill & Tosun, 2012). This understanding of the variety of reasons driving and shaping public engagement in the policy cycle and the complexity of such engagement provided the parameters for the conference.

This is not the first time the Martin McEvoy Conference series has examined this area and public engagement has been a recurring theme for the conference series since its establishment in 2002. Earlier conferences examined the area in 2007 ('Power, Dissent and Democracy – Civil Society and the State in Ireland' (Ó Broin & Kirby, 2009)) and 2010 ('Politics, Participation and Power – Civil Society and Public Policy in Ireland' (Ó Broin & Murphy, 2013)). The earlier conferences, and related publications, brought together a number of perspectives on participation and focused primarily on the fitness of our representative political institutions and on civil society's participation in policymaking processes, and its capacity to improve policymaking. It is worth bearing in mind that the earlier conferences were devised and took place at the height and subsequent collapse of the social partnership era, and the discussions and contributions arising from the conferences reflect the strong, if not dominant, corporatist influences on the policy discourse of that time.

Recent years have seen significant developments in the area of public engagement, including the establishment of deliberative mini-publics like the 'We the Citizens' Pilot Citizens' Assembly Constitutional Convention (2011), the Irish Constitutional Convention (2012–14) and the Citizens' Assembly (2016–18), and at local level the development of a number of noteworthy participatory innovations, including the establishment of public participation networks (PPNs), joint policing committees and local community development committees. There have also been a number of successful pilot deliberative initiatives, such as the participatory budgeting pilot in South Dublin County Council (Shannon et al., 2019) and the Carlow

GM Potato Citizens' Jury (Murphy, 2017). In this changed context the conference organisers felt it was appropriate to revisit the area and ascertain how new thinking about public participation, in particular the rise of interest in more deliberative forms of engagement, was impacting public institutions and policymaking processes. In addition, it was noted that while theories of participation have become more popular, and this is reflected in a variety of government reports (Government of Ireland, 2019, 2020), it was unclear the extent to which the actual space in policymaking processes for participation and engagement by the public had actually changed.

Earlier conferences in the series had heard a broad argument that as the demand for a more participative and deliberative democracy increases, it would 'bring into focus the types of governance arrangements required for a complex networked society of more critical citizens' (Ó Broin & Murphy 2013, p. 3). Arguably, this broad argument has been sustained and various forms of deliberative and participatory processes that offer the possibility of meaningful participation and engagement have been established. The majority of these have been initiated by the state and some by civil society; some worked, others did not, while for many it is too early to assess whether they are having the impact desired.

It remains of interest that the motivations for enabling 'public' participation in policymaking are not always clear. It is not always clear who the public is and how that public is constructed. In one way we can discern a move away from ideas of associational democracy and the structured participation of sectoral groups to engagement with individual citizens. In another way, particularly at local level, we see the resilience of 'associational life' (Cohen & Rogers, 1995) and the ongoing involvement of civil society organisations in all their variety in local policymaking processes, including the strategic policy committees and local community development committees of city and county councils.

It was in this context that the parameters for this special issue of *Administration* were agreed, and the issue will try to add to our understanding of the current approaches to, and potential trajectories of, public engagement in the public policy cycle.

Overview of contributions

What follows is a series of cases of public engagement in the policy cycle in a variety of policy domains, at various levels of governance and with varying degrees of success. In each article the authors will make

an argument as to why they consider an initiative to have been successful or unsuccessful. Each case is unique but we will see that successful initiatives tend to be associated with deep and substantive engagement by the relevant organisation, whether local government, statutory body or government department, with challenges facing the public and individual citizens as they attempt to engage, and a willingness to trial innovative approaches.

The issue begins with Lucas Olmedo, Mara van Twuijver, Mary O'Shaughnessy and Alan Sloane's case of the recent social enterprise and rural development policies, the growing recognition of the role that social enterprises play in rural areas and the challenges arising from efforts to strengthen their contribution to place-based sustainable rural development. Then Richard Boyle, Joanna O'Riordan, Fergal O'Leary and Laura Shannon consider the case of An Fóram Uisce (The Water Forum) and its role as a statutory body in formally engaging stakeholders in policy deliberation at national level. They argue that it is gradually evolving a role for itself in highlighting or putting an issue on the political and public agenda, and helping determine ways in which problems are addressed. They also note its success in providing members with a means of developing a shared understanding of the issues and agreeing potential solutions. Eoin Magennis, Jordana Corrigan, Neale Blair and Deiric Ó Broin look at the ongoing development of the Dublin–Belfast Economic Corridor and the recent efforts of a local authority and university-led network to further develop the corridor. Their paper argues that efforts to develop and consolidate the corridor will require the new network to engage widely, not only with a private sector whose rationale will be greater levels of commercial activity along the Corridor but also with other stakeholders, in particular politicians, who will bring other agendas into discussion, including sustainability and quality of life.

Paul Lawlor details the role of civil society organisations in identifying vulnerabilities to climate change in coastal areas and implementing climate adaptation responses. By assessing the current level and extent of engagement by community and voluntary groups in coastal adaptation projects, he argues that while the policies and governance structures for greater local-level participation in coastal adaptation responses are being put in place and progress has been made in mainstreaming climate adaptation policies, a factor that makes a positive contribution to creating the required enabling environment, further progress in their implementation is needed. Ali

Grehan looks at another climate-change-related case – the ongoing development of flood defences in Clontarf. The paper notes that Dublin City Council has spent fifteen years seeking to implement the project but has yet to agree a design approach with the community. The paper looks at the interaction between local citizens and the council from the point of view of why it has been so slow, outlining the challenges, particularly those facing the council and local communities. She argues that it is not certain that better public engagement would cause communities to embrace sustainable but transformative place-making projects. However, in the case of the Clontarf flood defences, Dublin City Council would have likely reached the point it is at now earlier. In other words, a more coherent and structured approach to public engagement would have saved time.

This is followed by a case reviewing the experience of a PPN in response to Covid-19. Simone Sav and Colette Downing discuss the ‘Community Call’ initiative, which sought to link national and local government with the community and voluntary sectors to coordinate and mobilise resources to combat the effects of the pandemic. They highlight the important role that the PPN played during the Covid-19 pandemic and argue that there is further potential for PPNs to promote deeper partnerships between local authorities and their communities than heretofore appreciated. Finally, Fintan Phelan looks at the experience of strategic policy committees and their role in the policy process at local level. He notes the relatively long existence of the committees and the limited evidence of success. The paper argues that the primary constraints are institutional design and power, and that despite many strategic policy committees adopting robust annual work programmes, the lack of any significant delegation of power from central government to local government means that the committees struggle to be truly active participants in local policy development.

In all cases we see that there are complex, and often interlinked, factors that play an important role in whether public institutions successfully develop mechanisms to facilitate public engagement in their respective policymaking processes. These can help us explain successes and failures. Though in some cases it can be argued that the obstacles to meaningful engagement are outside the remit of the public body – for example, the experience of strategic policy committees – taken as a whole the studies tell us something about how we should design public engagement processes, including an acknowledgment that sometimes they will fail. It is perhaps too easy to

say that well-considered processes can facilitate good public engagement and allow for good decisions. A clear problem is that the design and implementation of structured public engagement tends to be an afterthought, though the relatively centralised nature of the Irish state does contribute to difficulties of making policy at local level, and creates a complicated relationship between civil society organisations, public servants and politicians. Hopefully, an awareness of the challenges, as we offer here, will be of value to policymakers to alert them to possible mistakes and potential solutions.

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