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A Proposed National Spatial Strategy

Introduction

In 1968 Colin Buchanan presented his "Regional Studies in Ireland". A key recommendation of this Report was that as a counterbalance to the growth of the Dublin Region, two National Growth Centres should be established one in Cork and the other based on the Limerick-Shannon area. He also proposed Regional Growth Centres in Athlone, Drogheda, Dundalk, Galway and Waterford with Local Growth Centres in Castlebar, Cavan, Letterkenny and Tralee.

Buchanan proposed that the two National Growth Centres would be the primary means of balancing the continuing growth of the Dublin Region, which if unchecked would lead to a serious imbalance in the development of the country. The Report identified the problems in the country's spatial development and proposed bold and radical solutions. There was political concern that there would be 'winners' and 'losers' if the report was implemented. No action based on the Report was taken by the then, or successive governments.

In 2002 another national plan, The National Spatial Strategy was prepared. This proposed that development be based on 22 hub and gateway towns and cities. Though its strategy was aimed at making it more politically acceptable than Buchanan's proposal by dispersing development all over the country this plan was overtaken by events including the economic crisis of 2008.

Ireland since independence has never implemented a national spatial plan. The result is that the Greater Dublin Area has expanded at the expense of the rest of the country in an unplanned manner that has resulted in an increasingly deteriorating environment for those living in the area. Commuting distances from Dublin have now spread to over 80 kilometers resulting in journeys of between 1 to 2 hours each way for commuters. At the same time throughout the country rural towns and villages have declined while the rural population has increased. This population increase is largely the result of the proliferation of 'one off' urban generated houses. This has resulted in visually polluting the rural landscape, particularly around our cities and large towns, and polluting the environment with poorly functioning waste water treatment plants. Much of this rural generated housing is the result of political interference with the development control system.

Possible Spatial Strategies

These could be summarized as follows:

1. Continue Existing Trends . This is described in the NPF document "Ireland 2040, Our Plan, Issues and Choices" as "Business as usual" and clearly would lead to the continuing growth of the Dublin and Eastern

Region to the detriment of the country as a whole as well as reducing the quality of life of those living in the East of the country

2. Develop National and Regional Growth Centres. This would reflect the proposals of the Buchanan Report referred to earlier. This would result in designating the Greater Cork Area and Limerick-Shannon as the key National Growth Centres to counter the growth of the Dublin region. Other cities such as Waterford, Galway, Sligo, Kilkenny as well as the towns of Drogheda, Athlone and Tralee would form a second tier of Regional Development Centres.

3. Develop a Network of Regional Cities. The document, "Ireland 2040 Our Plan" raises the possibilities of using the major cities of Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford to drive growth in their regions. A similar strategy is proposed by the Irish Academy of Engineering "The Atlantic City Regions, Development and Connectivity"

This proposes that Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford should have improved connectivity both in physical as well as digital and acting in consort would be developed to become the alternative means of countering the continued expansion of Dublin and the Eastern Region. The Atlantic City Region spans an area measuring 300 km from Waterford through Cork and Limerick to Galway. It is not clear what mechanism would be put in place to ensure that the four dispersed cities would act in unison in deciding on the allocation of development resources and how the cities would act in a 'complementary' manner to one another. .

4. A Dispersed Pattern of Development. this would be similar to the National Spatial Strategy by endeavouring to spread development more evenly across the country to the cities and major towns. It would be politically popular but in my opinion would fail in acting as a counter balance to the growth of the growth of the Eastern Region. The country does not have the economic resources to pursue a dispersed pattern of growth

Preferred Strategy.

It is my view that the most successful strategy would be one that was based on establishing two National Growth Centres namely The Greater Cork Area and The Limerick-Shannon Area together with designating Galway, Waterford, Sligo, Kilkenny, Tralee and Dundalk as Regional Growth Centres.

The Greater Cork Area would embrace the city, Cork Harbour and the Satellite Towns surrounding it. A new local administration would be established for the area. I do not support the proposal that the Cork City and County Councils should be merged. Such a body would be unwieldy and would be unlikely to achieve the growth potential that an administrative body tasked with a smaller geographic area would achieve. The distance from Castletownbere in the south west of the county to Mitchelstown in the north east is over 140 km, similar to the distance from Dublin to Wexford. For a growth centre to function effectively should be populated by people who share similar economic and social goals. Having a mainly agricultural hinterland as part of a combined city and county authority makes no planning sense. There is little 'comminality' of interests between a person living in Blarney and a person living Bantry. I believe that the Greater Cork Area is a concept that people in the area would identify with.

Similarly I believe that a Limerick-Shannon Area is one that would be cohesive and have a distinct identity and could be successfully run by an expanded City Council. The possibility exists of developing a Western Development Zone by linking Limerick to Galway through Shannon and Ennis. Good road and rail infrastructure already exists between the two cities.

Unlike the proposals for the development of Regional Cities or The Atlantic City Region having one local authority to 'champion' the development of each of the National Growth Centres is a major advantage. It is difficult to see the councils in the cities forming the Atlantic City Region acting in a unified manner to promote growth in cities which are geographically dispersed and see themselves as competitors for development

resources rather than as partners.

Regional Growth Centres in the cities of Galway, Sligo, and Kilkenny and in the major towns of Athlone, Dundalk and Tralee would act as catalyst for growth in their regions. The possibility of establishing 'Regional Development Clusters' as part of this strategy could be pursued. Kilkenny and Carlow as well as Westport, Castlebar and Ballina are potential Regional Development Clusters.

I believe the above strategy is appropriate to the physical size of the country and to the resources that are available to promote development.

Caveat

As a people we have not shown a capacity for or interest in physical planning at national, regional or local level when compared to other European nations. Politicians have avoided making choices which are seen to obviously favour certain areas over others. Previous national and regional spatial planning proposals have not been acted upon. With the present proposed plan for 'Ireland 2040' we are attempting to shut the barn door when not only have the horses bolted but the doors have come off their hinges. Following the Buchanan Report numerous planners, geographers, economists and others warned of the danger of not having a strategy to counter the growth of the Greater Dublin Area. nothing was done and we now have major environmental, infrastructural, housing and social problems involving 40% of the population and covering nearly a third of the country. Unless there is a firm commitment by government to implement a new National Spatial Plan all the effort by many bodies and individuals will again be wasted.

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