

Tuam Town Council under Threat from Local Government Reform

By **John Quinn MSc IT** - Published on February 26th, 2010

In this season of Lenten abstinence, the imminent publication of a white paper on local government reform will be sobering stuff for members of local authorities. Incumbent Minister Gormley will no doubt continue to favour more powerful regional authorities at the expense of County Councils, City Councils and Town Councils. The infamous McCarthy report even when taken in moderation is no cure either as it advocates the abolition of both Regional Authorities and Town Councils to provide a single local authority structure of government. In the context of these proposed reforms; recent clarion calls for more locally devolved powers by aspiring members of the Tuam Town Council could yet become the plaintive cry of a political landscape laid to waste by the double whammy of latter day McCarthyism and the economic imperative of cost effective local government.

Tuam Mayor, Tom Reilly on Tuesday night last en route to the aid of an elderly constituent in Milltown took time out from an exacting schedule to discuss the implications of these proposed reforms for the people of Tuam. The Mayor, a 20 year veteran of local politics having been directly elected twice as Mayor and two-time Chairman is uniquely qualified to provide an insight into the achievements, objectives and workings of a Town Council.

His road to Damascus moment from fundraiser to politician came in 1991 during a highly successful 100 mile sponsored walk in aid of the Irish Wheelchair Association (IWA). He proudly remembers the registration number (91-G-881) of the bus that was purchased from the proceeds of this fundraiser. Despite the palpable and bitter disappointment at narrowly missing out on retaining his county council seat, he still maintains an affection and enthusiasm for his vocation and will no doubt have the political stamina to contest the seat again in the 2014 local elections.

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Any political cynicism beloved of the journalist quickly dissipated during the course of our conversation where it became patiently obvious that he performs these duties with a genuine motivation and passion.

Quite how this instinct for and a devotion to the needs of local people as personified by the Mayor and his colleagues on the Town Council would be replicated in a more powerful Regional Authority structure is at best difficult to comprehend. Due to their highly specific nature, would it even be feasible that these needs could be effectively satisfied by a remote regional body? Granted, Tuam would in all probability have some formal relationship with this Regional Structure but I remind myself that the late Seamus Brennan in this political context would ominously observe that *'yes our lads would be playing inter county hurling but our difficulty would surely lie in competing successfully against an awful lot of other lads with county medals'*.

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The Town Council as the Mayor confides operates on a shoestring budget consisting exclusively of rental income from the properties it owns. A modest annual grant of €1000 is shared equally between three deserving locally based organizations. A more substantial grant is provided to the Tuam Chamber of Commerce for Christmas lighting. The council's real strength though, as the Mayor enthuses, lies not in its budgetary prowess but in its access to priceless expertise, funding, and influence at local and national level. The nurturing and skilful use of these official and political resources by each member of the council has resulted in a number of notable funding successes. In a regional context, these successes might only be worth a hill of beans but they matter an awful lot more to the local people of the town.

The recent widening of the road to remove a traffic bottleneck from St Josephs Park to simplify the delivery of home heating oil to its residents is a case in point. The imaginative use of limited road space to regulate a traffic and pedestrian black spot on the Ballygaddy Road is another example. I can't imagine getting a sympathetic hearing from a regional body on these highly specific but imminently sensible local projects.

Other examples as the Mayor points out include, CCTV, greater access to buildings, footpath upgrades, grants for the elderly, pedestrian crossings and the joint policing scheme.

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I particularly like the extended access to the post office in Circular Road as it is almost possible to dodge the melancholic stare of strategically located but dubious looking charity collectors.

The Mayor readily acknowledges that the RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development) designation was a decisive factor in obtaining funding for a number of these projects. So there we have it, a contrasting group of people working in complete harmony across party political lines for the benefit of the whole town. Realistically folks, this outbreak of harmony will be severely tested in the heat of political battle in the election of four years time.

Wherever success goes, it is accompanied by its fellow traveller failure most often tinged with regret. The lost opportunity for Tuam to host the Motor Taxation Office for a meagre €200k plus staff costs is a running sore with the Mayor. The council's lack of political clout to decisively influence the case for the Athenry to Tuam phase of the Western Rail Corridor is also regrettable. On balance though, the council's successes by far outweigh its failures. Regional authorities have merit in particular, their ability to coordinate public services and to monitor the delivery of EU structural funds in the regions. I can't help reminding myself though, that these unelected bodies as currently constituted reek of political cronyism where the needs of local people are often subservient to party political considerations.

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At the real risk of being old fashioned in the zest for local government reform, it might be better to leave well enough alone. Locally elected members to locally accountable bodies with emotional and indigenous links to the people they represent are in my view far more likely to deliver for our town. The late Joe Burke, Miko Kelly and Brian McNamara to mention but a few would then find eternal political peace, secure in the knowledge that the Town Council carries on their proud tradition of public service and duty to all the people of Tuam.

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