# 6. Rediscovering Our Regions

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A recent article in a weekend magazine enquired whether the ancient nine-county province of Ulster had any meaning in contemporary Ireland. Thinking initially in terms of literature, the author wondered whether there could be said to be a distinctive *Ulster* poetry. She then went on to pose the question more broadly. 'Is there an Ulster?' she enquired. 'Is there anything that carries the adjective that can be seen and touched and photographed, apart from an Ulster fry?'

The article caught my attention for a number of reasons, but in particular because its author appeared to assume that provinces correspond to regions, and therefore should possess some degree of unity or sameness. In the author's words, they should 'hang together'. The requirement of internal cohesion is indeed central to the notion of a region, but the designation of provinces as regions is rather more questionable, and appears to be indicative of a general confusion in the public mind about regions. Despite this confusion, the concept of the region has been central to recent debates about public spending and investment in Ireland, particularly that which is co-financed by the European Union. Moreover,

the publication last autumn of the eagerly anticipated National Spatial Strategy has presented an opportunity for this, the least well developed of our territorial concepts, to acquire a new significance in Irish public policy and planning.

## Regions, Regionalism and Regionalization

So, what exactly are regions, and what are the factors that have led to their recent prominence in public policy debates? The concept of the region is essentially a geographical one, and geographers were the first academics to place the study of regions at the centre of their discipline. The geographical study of regions was at its height in the first half of the twentieth century. With the completion of the polar expeditions and the other great explorations, geographers turned to the task of describing the newly charted territories as well as the older known world. The central concept and unit of analysis that they employed for this purpose was that of the region.

Over the years, the concept evolved in terms of its meaning. Initially, regions were conceived of as blocks of territory that showed a strong degree of internal uniformity relative to surrounding areas. This uniformity might be expressed in the natural environment, the cultural (i.e. man-made) environment, or, ideally, both together. The list of characteristics on which regional divisions have been based includes topography, climate, agriculture, industry, population, way of life and so on. Regions defined in this way are referred to as formal regions. An example within Ireland might be the Golden Vale dairying region in north Munster, where, as Horner observes, the twice-daily milking routine is a major regulator of farming activity, and, ultimately, lifestyles.[1] A country in which formal regions have been especially well developed historically is France, with its rich tapestry of distinctive landscapes or pays. Regions such as Provence and Brittany are distinguished not just by their topography, but also by their land use and

settlement patterns, their architecture, lifestyles and customs.

However, in France as elsewhere, the modernization of agriculture and improvements in transportation and communications in the years after the Second World War contributed to the erosion of formal regions. These improvements included the construction of the motorway network and the development of television and other mass media, which together greatly increased the movement of people, goods, information and ideas across traditional regional boundaries. The advent of the welfare state, with its emphasis on the common provision of services such as education and healthcare, was also a factor in the reduction of regional distinctiveness within states.

In response to these trends, a new concept of the region evolved. Increasingly, in the new era of greatly enhanced mobility, it made more sense to see regions as areas that exhibit some degree of self-containment or cohesion with respect to the movements of people and commodities. Regions defined in this way are termed functional regions. Thus we might speak of the Dublin functional region as the area corresponding roughly to the commuting hinterland of the capital. This version of the regional concept allows for change over time. With the pace of development in the eastern part of the country, the Dublin functional region is today considerably larger than it was even a decade ago. It now extends over much of Leinster, including a large part of counties Louth, Meath, Westmeath, Offaly, Laois, Kildare and Wicklow. Modern geographical thinking allows functional regions to have not just one, but several focal points, each one generating and attracting various forms of social interaction. The only requirement is that the intensity of such interactions within the region is significantly greater than across the regional boundary. Functional regions of this kind are referred to as polycentric regions.

Both formal and functional regions are defined on the basis of objective criteria. However, in a third version of the regional concept,

regions are defined on a more subjective basis. A vernacular region is one that is identified as such by its inhabitants, and perhaps also those from outside the region. In other words, it is a region first and foremost in the mind, an integral part of a people's self-identity. The American South – extending from the Carolinas to Texas and from Tennessee to Florida – is a good example. The degree of popular identification with regions is measured in the concept of regionalism, and two of its characteristics can be noted at this point. First, regionalism is often based on a shared and distinctive historical experience; and second, it can vary considerably, even within countries. In some countries regionalism seems to grow in strength as distance from the capital city increases. A recent opinion poll suggests that the UK is a good example of this phenomenon. [2]

Whether this is also the case in Ireland is unclear, due to lack of survey information. However, a more pertinent observation is surely that, while Irish people identify strongly with the county or smaller units of area such as the parish or townland, there does not appear to be a similar sense of identification with the region. For example, think of someone from Donegal who has recently arrived in Dublin, and is asked the usual question used in Ireland to establish identity – 'Where are you from?' That person is most unlikely to reply, 'I'm from the north-west,' or 'the Border Region'. Likewise, if we were to poll the inhabitants of, say, a medium-sized town such as Mullingar or Tuam, on the question of what region they live in, it is doubtful if we would get any kind of consensus. Most Irish people would probably not be able to name any regional entity in response to this question.

Clearly then, regionalism is not well-developed in Ireland. There are several reasons for this. First, as noted by one of Ireland's earliest regional chroniclers, the geographer T.W. Freeman, complex variations in geomorphology, vegetation and land use within small areas make the task of regional delineation quite difficult. [3] The weakness of regionalism in Ireland is also partly due to the

absence of any significant, territorially based, cultural and ethnic variation, such as we find in many of the other states of the European Union.[4] The Basque country and Catalonia in Spain, Flanders in Belgium, Scotland and Wales within the UK, Brittany and the Languedoc region in France are all prominent examples.

Important as these aspects of the geography of the country have been, arguably the most significant reason for the lack of regional consciousness in Ireland is that we have never had a regional tier of government or public administration. States build nations, in the sense that the institutional apparatus of the state helps to establish a common sense of identity and loyalty among its citizens. The most important of these nation-building state institutions is probably the government itself. In similar fashion, a strong regional administration can promote popular identification with, and loyalty to, the region. Indeed central governments' appreciation of this, and fear of its effect on national unity, has often been expressed in political opposition to regional devolution. For examples of this, we need look no further than Spain, during the Franco era, or post-war France under various Gaullist regimes.

It is significant therefore that, in Ireland, government is highly centralized. The high level of centralization relative to our European neighbours and the problems arising from it have long been recognized, even by central government itself, and have led to the setting up of a succession of expert committees, commissions and task forces to report on the possibilities for greater decentralization. These include: the Advisory Expert Committee on Local Government Reorganisation and Reform (also known as the Barrington Committee), which reported in 1991;[5] the Reorganisation Commission, which reported in 1996; the Devolution Commission, which reported in 1996 and 1997; and the Task Force on the Integration of Local Government and Local Development, which reported in 1998 and 1999.

While these various initiatives have led to some changes in *local*

governance, the most notable being the establishment of county and city development boards, not much has changed at the regional level. Here a major institutional vacuum existed up until 1993, when Regional Authorities were established under the provisions of the Local Government Act of 1991. Even then, the new bodies were entrusted with only a narrow range of functions, and their members indirectly elected by and from the constituent local authorities, rather than by popular franchise. It is not surprising, therefore, that they have so far failed to capture the public imagination. It is doubtful, in fact, if more than a minority of the population is aware of the existence of the Regional Authorities, or the functions they perform. It has not helped either that many public bodies continue to divide the national territory for their own purposes without any reference to the Regional Authority areas. The Barrington Report highlighted the need to harmonize these multiple regional divisions if regional loyalties are to be properly developed.

The weakness of both regionalism and of administrative regionalization in Ireland reflects the relative unimportance of regions as economic entities. Strong regions that command the loyalties of their inhabitants, such as Lombardy in Italy, are often associated with vibrant regional economies. Likewise, Ulster's identity was in large part forged by industrialization based on the linen and shipbuilding industries in the nineteenth century. In the Republic of Ireland, industrialization came much later, and when it did, it was based largely on a dependence on foreign capital. Many of the firms that located here in the post-1960s wave of foreign investment had few links to the local economy. Instead they tended to be outward looking, both for sources of input and for their markets. None of this helped to generate a strong sense of regional identity, nor did it stimulate demands for regional devolution.

## The Persistence of the Region

In spite of all these difficulties, the idea of the region as a basis for organizing public services as well as civil and commercial life has persisted in Ireland. Over the years there have been repeated calls for a greater emphasis on the regional aspect of economic development, and, associated with this, for the creation of new regional structures, up to and including regional governments.[6]

There are several sources of these demands arising both within and without the state. Outside Ireland, the Council of Europe and the European Union have been strong advocates of regional devolution. The concept of a 'Europe of the Regions', which both organizations have helped to promote, envisages a politically and economically re-invigorated Europe, in which the pressures of globalization are mediated and regulated by supranational institutions, while the delivery of public services is increasingly devolved to democratically elected, regional-level bodies.

The institutions of the European Union, especially the Commission and the Parliament, have had a particularly strong influence on the development of regional structures in Ireland. Our heavy reliance, until very recently, on European financing of our development plans has given these bodies considerable leverage in this respect. In 1988, a major reform of the structural funds, associated with the passing of the Single European Act, provided for a doubling of aid to less-developed areas, including Ireland, provided that satisfactory development plans were submitted to Europe. The reform simultaneously emphasized the need for central governments to consult regional interests in the preparation of these plans.

The Irish government responded with some alacrity to these promptings, by setting up a regional consultative structure based on a division of the country into seven regions, which were used in the consultation process underpinning the preparation of the National Development Plan 1989–93. Significantly though, these regions differed from an earlier set of nine physical planning regions
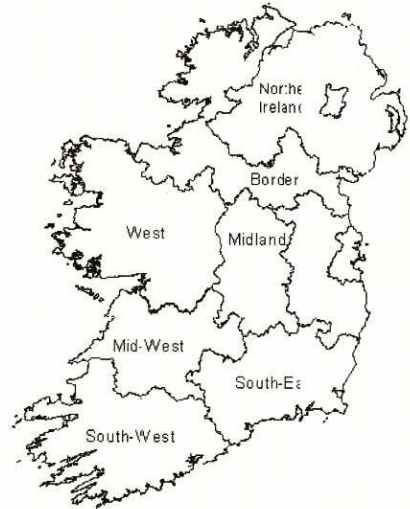
# Regionalizations in Ireland

Physical Planning Regions, 1964

EU Regions, 1988

Regional Authorities

established in the 1960s, and in turn they themselves were re-cast when the eight Regional Authorities were established in the nineties (see figure).

More recently, the EU again assumed a central role in the development of Irish regional structures, when the rapid growth of the Celtic Tiger economy in the late nineties resulted in the country as a whole no longer qualifying for priority (Objective 1) status under the structural funds. In order to retain as much of the Brussels largesse as possible, the government created two new 'super-regions' in November 1998. The Southern and Eastern Region extends from Dublin along the east coast and includes all of Munster; the remainder of the country comprises the Border, Midlands and West (BMW) Region. Despite its acronym, this region is characterized by a significantly weaker level of economic activity, and therefore has retained Objective 1 designation. However, the real story of this most recent regionalization concerns the way in which the division became the subject of some contention between the Irish and EU authorities. Continuing the regrettable tendency to constantly revise regional boundaries, which has been one of the main factors undermining the role of regions in public affairs, the government's original proposal for the division included both Clare and Kerry in the BMW region. This would have entailed the new regional boundary cutting across the established Regional Authority areas. Significantly, the EU authorities showed themselves to be more serious about regionalization than the Irish government, by insisting that the integrity of the existing regional structures be respected.

Along with these external factors, there have been domestic reasons for a renewed interest in regions. Among these is a growing recognition that the governance needs of a modern society increasingly require a more decentralized form of government. There is some international evidence to suggest that higher levels of decentralization are associated with greater prosperity: countries

with strongly developed local and/or regional government, such as the Scandinavian countries and Germany, also enjoy relatively high living standards. The nature of this relationship is not fully understood, but one possible explanation is that decentralization leads to improved economic performance by promoting local initiative as well as more responsive and innovative government.

One of the areas in which the link between regionalization and development is most apparent is that of industrial policy. In recent years there has been a growing recognition that reliance on one-off foreign direct investment is not a sound basis for sustainable economic development. This has been brought into sharp focus by the global economic downturn that began in 2001, and that has resulted in significant job losses across the country. A recent international survey conducted for the American *Foreign Policy* magazine found that Ireland was the most globalized country in the world, based on an index that takes into account four different aspects of globalization. One of these is economic integration, as measured by, *inter alia*, trade, foreign investment, and income flows. Given Ireland's high level of integration into the global economy, it was inevitable that the changing external economic environment would adversely affect us. However, it is also apparent that many of the recent job losses were in branch plants that had little or no economic ties to the localities and regions in which they were located. Factories that are disconnected from their host economies in this way will always be likely targets for job losses, or outright closure, when reduced international demand leads to a reduction in output.

Recognizing the problems of branch plant investment, the Industrial Development Authority has now adopted a new approach to industrial promotion. Central to this is the concept of industrial clusters, which is based largely on the writings of the American economist Michael Porter.[7] Clusters are networks of inter-linked, highly innovative firms in high-technology industries, together with supporting financial and research institutions,

economic and business associations, and government agencies. Modern thinking is that industrial policy stands a better chance of success when directed towards the promotion of these industrial networks rather than the attraction of stand-alone developments. A great deal of international research has focused on clusters in the last few years, much of which suggests that there is a greater likelihood of success when they are organized regionally, and based on the indigenous resources of each region. In turn, this points to the desirability of having regional governments, which would be best able to identify and provide the kind of supports, including policy co-ordination, that clusters need in order to flourish.

Finally, the case for regionalization in twenty-first-century Ireland has been strengthened by the pressures exerted on the country's infrastructure as a direct result of rapid economic growth. There are many ways in which these pressures are evident. Probably the issues that have gained the most attention in the media are the rapid increase in house prices, especially in Dublin and the other urban centres, and the worsening traffic congestion on our roads. These problems are closely related, of course. Many of the new workers are young people who have been unable to afford housing close to their employment in the larger urban areas. Consequently, they are forced into long-distance commuting, effectively substituting travel costs for housing costs. The economic and social effects of large volumes of out-commuting on smaller towns and rural areas are not yet fully researched, but it is likely that, on balance, they are negative. What are certainly evident are the environmental pressures resulting from badly planned housing developments. In general, problems in water supply and in waste disposal are likely to emerge as among the most serious faced by the country in the years ahead. Together all these growth pressures have highlighted the need to pay some attention to the regional spread of development across the country.

## Regions in the National Spatial Strategy

The government's response to this need was first signalled in the National Development Plan 2000–2006.[8] The Plan committed the government to producing a National Spatial Strategy (NSS), which would act as a blueprint for the long-term geographical distribution of population and economic activity. The development of the NSS was underpinned by extensive research and public consultations. The research programme covered a wide range of factors imping-ing on the territorial development of the state, but unfortunately the time available to the researchers was quite restricted. In addi-tion, there is the problem that both the quality and quantity of data available at local and especially regional level is quite poor. In so far as this is due to the weakness of regional structures, it is possible to discern a strong element of chickens coming home to roost!

The strategy was published in November 2002, and is intended to be 'a twenty year planning framework designed to achieve a bet-ter balance of social, economic, physical development and popula-tion growth between regions'.[9] In recent years there have been major policy statements in relation to various non-spatial aspects of development in Ireland. These include the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, and the Strategy for Sustainable Development, which relate to the social and the environmental dimensions of develop-ment respectively. The National Spatial Strategy (NSS) now com-plements these by providing for the geographical dimension. As such, it is potentially one of the most important initiatives in regional and spatial planning in the history of the state.

The NSS is designed to help achieve the objectives of existing economic policy (increased productivity and international compet-itiveness), social policy (improvement in the quality of life for all sections of society), and environmental policy (enhancement of the country's natural and cultural heritage). In addition, the strategy has the explicitly spatial objective of fostering balanced regional development. Significantly, this is defined as 'developing the full

potential of each area to contribute to the optimal performance of the state as a whole – economically, socially and environmentally'.[10] It is clear, therefore, that balanced regional development does not mean that every area of the country must have similar levels of population, investment, and economic activity. Rather, each area is to be facilitated to reach its capacity for development based on its existing population and other resources. This approach is sensible, in that it is neither possible nor desirable for levels of development to be identical everywhere.

The means by which the spatial strategy aims to achieve balanced regional development is through the promotion of new roles for selected larger centres of population as either 'gateways' or 'development hubs'. The concept of gateways emphasizes the role of the largest centres in attracting external investment into the country, and communicating the benefits of this to the wider regions in which they are located. Because gateways need to possess a minimum level of population, infrastructure and services, only nine have been designated. These include the cities of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, as well as the towns of Dundalk and Sligo. In addition, the midland towns of Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore are jointly designated as a gateway, and it is envisaged that by linking with Derry, Letterkenny can also fulfil this role. There is a similar number of development hubs, which are conceived of as medium-sized towns that are well connected to gateways and that will act to spread growth to even smaller towns and the rural areas. Two of the hubs are also based on linking together neighbouring centres: Ballina-Castlebar in the west, and Tralee-Killarney in the south-west.

The fact that the number of gateways and hubs is necessarily limited (though greater than what some commentators have suggested is optimal) means there is a danger that the NSS will be seen as favouring certain places over others. It may be perceived as being all about selecting winners and losers. Such a view was expressed,

in the immediate aftermath of the strategy's publication, by public representatives from several non-designated towns. But although the designation of centres is the aspect of the spatial plan that has attracted most public attention and comment, the document in fact sets out a more inclusive vision of the territorial development of the state, in which all places have a role to play. The joint designation of centres as gateways or hubs is one way in which this inclusivity is expressed. More generally, it is promoted through a strong emphasis on co-operation and complementarity between places at regional level. The research for the strategy included an examination of functional regions, using data on travel to work, schools, shops, and social facilities, and these regions featured prominently in a public consultation paper on the strategy.[11] While they receive little mention in the NSS itself, there remains a strong emphasis throughout on the regional dimension, with one chapter devoted to a detailed elaboration of how the statutory regions will participate in future territorial development.

The success of the strategy will depend critically on securing the envisaged co-operation between places. This will not be easy, given that relations between neighbouring urban centres in Ireland have traditionally been marked more by a spirit of competition than of co-operation. In recent times this has been evident, for example, in considerable squabbling over the programme for the decentralization of the public services, and over infrastructural development, notably the routing of new motorways. This state of affairs reflects the strength of localism and the weakness of regionalism in this country. Ultimately, therefore, what is needed for the NSS to succeed in its vision of a more balanced spatial structure, is the development of a stronger regional consciousness and sense of regional identity amongst the public at large and its elected representatives.

## Conclusion

Ireland currently stands at a critical juncture in terms of the territorial development of the state. Until now, regions have had a very low profile in public administration and policy, and indeed in the public imagination. The National Spatial Strategy has the potential to change this situation significantly. Its suggested mechanisms for spatial development, together with the broad thrust of industrial and environmental policy, point to the desirability of an enhanced role for regions in Ireland. Regions may yet emerge as key forums for democratic decision-making about where people live, where they work, and what kind of services and lifestyles they enjoy. This vision of localities and regions that are more self-reliant, and less dependent and focused on the capital city, is surely one worth striving for. However, given the on-again off-again, opportunistic and ad hoc nature of official engagement with the regions in the past, it's probably wise to temper optimism with a degree of caution – at least for the time being.