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There's more to 'planning' than coloured maps



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It's about 18 years now since Michael Smith described 'planning' as a "debased currency", and in the intervening nearly two decades, it could be argued that planning hasn't done much to redeem itself.

That, of course, isn't strictly true. Any decent analysis would demonstrate that many positive things have come from good planning decisions; the employment created, investment generated, environments protected and developed, and new life injected where needed.

Much has also gone wrong, and despite evidence sometimes to the contrary, a sizeable portion of the legacy of our boom and bust is connected with planning. For many it is easier to recall the negative side of planning – the ghost estates, the negative equity, the half-finished commercial buildings – than the positive. Occasionally they are one and the same, as in the Dublin Docklands Development Authority debacle.

It's also quite easy to target planning for some or all of our ills and in many situations planning rightly deserves to be targeted. In all probability our planning system needs an overhaul, to be dragged into the modern world, away from zoning, bureaucracy, development control, obsessions with brick colour and roof tiles, and other outdated practices.

The point is, planning as understood by most people, has a poor reputation.

The sad thing from planning's perspective is that these negative connotations mean that when the word 'planning' is mentioned, people become cynical or jaded or both. But planning is about more than one-off housing, development plans, requests for additional information and the like. Indeed our planners are educated and trained for much, much more than that. However, it seems to be something we have forgotten, but planning is

about making provision for the future. The concept of planning, in its broadest, and to my mind proper, sense of the word seems to be something we have never grasped in Ireland.

Planning in Ireland seems to be subsidiary to everything else. A national budget is prepared, and then we plan around that. Government departments receive their annual allocation of finances, and then they plan what they will or can do. Such budgets are generally prepared for one year at a time, and any proper plan is about far more than a twelve month (or even four year) period. There is an obvious disconnect therefore, and the disconnection occurs because we have the sequence of events the wrong way around.

In any first year commerce programme, students are taught that the plan comes first and a budget is there to support the plan. If there are insufficient funds to support the entire plan at first, then that is factored in, but the point is there exists a plan, an end-goal of sufficient importance and impact that it will receive continuing support from the budget. A budget is not a plan.

This means that there should be long-term and integrated (not completely separate) plans for growth, for prosperity, for employment, for enterprise, and any budget should support these plans. A plan that follows a budget is not a plan, it is a mere exercise in keeping a drowning man's nose above water until the next budget, and that is simply not good enough. And, to keep the analogy going, that man should be at the centre of any plan.

Plans that do not put people front and centre are doomed to failure. From national plans, to economic plans, to local plans, if people are not the main focus of the plan, it will fail. People will find a way around it to suit themselves – sometimes through using their local politicians, for example, to circumvent 'the

system' – resulting in a dilution of the plan and frantic time-wasting enforcement actions in order to make people comply.

Putting people first in plans also means recognising that what is good for one area, region, or location might not be good for another. A one-size-fits-all approach to planning – in all senses of the word – is inappropriate. Different sectors of society, different regions have different needs and different resources. Think of Mayo and Cork, Donegal and Dublin. Each has different physical and social needs and resources, and any plan should respond to and use that. What Dublin needs and has, Donegal doesn't usually need, and possibly can't have; and vice-versa.

The difficulty in planning is political: recognising and admitting and accepting this. Irish politics has not been too good at this to date. A 'one for everyone in the audience' approach has raised false expectations and frictions between different areas and regions. Promises of investment, industry, tourism, jobs, hospitals, roads everywhere have been the order of the day. These promises have caused a lot of disappointments and arguments, and worse still, a lot of division.

A budget should be subservient to a plan. Indeed, for over 60 countries worldwide, it is the norm to have the main government ministry responsible for planning. Not just spatial planning, but economic, social welfare, education, agriculture, and so forth. What is clever about this idea is that, as the planning is done from one ministry, the plans are already integrated with each other across functions but also strategically, nationally and regionally.

The plans produced have such detail as budgets (the budget following the plan) and targets for jobs, revenue, and expenditure. This means that any plans for a new housing estate, factory, or school for example, has input from several different departments before it happens, not in a disjointed, piecemeal fashion post-hoc. It also reduces time, money, duplication and waste.

Even more enlightening for the Irish situation is that in many of these countries the 'department of finance' (or equivalent) is subservient to the planning function. It would be interesting to present that proposal to the Department of Finance here. The Department of Finance, it seems, likes to be in charge. But when the accountants and economists are put in charge, however, things don't always go to plan. The IRFU ticket pricing controversy last autumn is a good example: when profit or financial issues are the main driver, as they seemed to be there, then the bigger picture (in this case, the fans) is quite often lost. And Ireland is a society, not a business, so it is not only important, but logical to take the bigger picture.

From an outside investment perspective a planning ministry like this looks good. It looks like there is a logical, co-ordinated response to any approach they might make. Currently,

investment is directed to specific areas, where some mandarin or politician would like it to locate in an apparently ad-hoc fashion. As an example, see the IDA's *Horizon 2020* report which stated that 50% of all new foreign direct investment would be located outside urban areas. These areas might be news to the local planning, education and infrastructure authorities. There is also the other aspect to this, in that FDI will go where it needs to go, not where it is directed to go for political reasons. This is not a strategy or a plan, but crazy and illogical as it is, it seems it's what we do.

Right now, Ireland has a four year recovery 'plan' drawn up by financiers and economists and the Department of Finance. Strategic it is not, a plan it is not. It is merely a mechanism for saving money; it is a budget, but it serves no plan.

I am very aware of the Department of Economic Planning and Development from 1977, and its lack of success, but that was again a ministry driven by accountants and economists. Even now in the current Department of Finance, its dearth of professional economists would point towards a lack of commitment to longer term planning, even that of the purely economic variety.

Planning in its real sense, of making provision for the future, is a force for good; we're just not using it to its full potential. Our current systems and practices, leading to limited and delimiting plans, such as they are, simply waste time, resources and potential for investment. Think of being a multi-billion euro potential industrial investor looking at Ireland right now. What might you think?

It may be ironic, but in a time of crisis the potential to introduce a dedicated ministry for planning, a proper department in which other departments including finance are branches, is ripe. There is huge potential to at last revalue the currency of planning. ♦

