Social Partnership as a Mode of Governance – Introduction to the Special Issue

1 author:

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

Digital Repository of Ireland View project

New Deals View project

Social Partnership as a Mode of Governance: Introduction to the Special Issue

SEÁN Ó RIAIN
National University of Ireland, Maynooth

I INTRODUCTION

The development of "social partnership" institutions has been one of the most striking, and surprising aspects of the transformation of Irish society and politics in the past fifteen years. The papers in this special issue explore the character of social partnership as a distinctive mode of governance – examining partnership in action at national and local levels and in interaction with the EU, in macroeconomic bargaining, in sectoral and environmental policy, and in urban and rural settings.

The papers are all extensive revisions of papers first presented at a conference on "Social Partnership: A New Mode of Governance?" at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth in September 2004. The conference was generously funded by the Irish Research Council for The Humanities and Social Sciences and was held under the auspices of the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis and the Department of Sociology at NUI Maynooth. Thanks also go to the other authors who presented papers at the conference.

The papers have all proceeded through the normal reviewing process at *The Economic and Social Review* prior to inclusion in this issue. One external reviewer read the full set of papers and provided reviews of each, while each paper was also read by a second external reviewer. Our special thanks go to

Professor Lars Mjoset (who has allowed us to use his name) who read and reviewed all of the papers. The editorial process for each paper was handled by two Associate Editors of the *ESR*, Seán Ó Riain and Helen Russell. Neither handled papers written by authors from their own institution.

II UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP

Social partnership institutions emerged in Ireland with relatively little warning. Despite the relative weakness of the centralised peak associations that typically were associated with corporatism in Europe, and the patchy history of national wage agreements in the 1960s and 1970s, a series of centralised pay deals began in 1987 that continue today (Hardiman, 1988; 1994). The divergence between Irish institutional development and the corporatist model became even clearer as partnership extended beyond national wage deals to local area-based partnerships to tackle social exclusion or promote rural development; to national forums to incorporate the community and voluntary sector; and ultimately to a wide range of vertical sectors such as education, environment and technology. Social partnership institutions in Ireland were arguably more extensive than in the classic cases of European corporatism which were primarily linked to macroeconomic policy and industrial relations, while at the same time the national institutions were less able to deliver on the classic corporatist promise of growth with equality. Indeed European political organisation has increasingly moved towards Irish style partnership institutions so that Irish social partnership is now simply one (albeit significant) case of a wider European phenomenon. As Mary Corcoran (this volume) notes, "…partnership is the preferred mode of regulation adopted by the contemporary European state".

A significant body of research into the disparate forms of partnership has developed – including research on national macroeconomic agreements (e.g. Hardiman, 1994, 2000; Taylor, 1996; O'Donnell, 2000; Roche and Cradden, 2003); on the National Economic and Social Forum and the Community and Voluntary Pillar (e.g. McCashin *et al.*, 2001; Meade, 2005; Powell and Geoghegan, 2004); on local partnerships (e.g. Walsh *et al.*, 1998; Walsh, 2000; Varley and Curtin, 2002; Sabel, 1996; Bartley and Shine, 2002) and on partnership institutions in vertical sectors such as industrial relations (Roche, 1998); industrial policy (Ó Riain, 2000, 2004); environment (Taylor, 2001; Fagan *et al.*, 2001) and others. However, there has been relatively little consideration of social partnership as a distinctive mode of governance, exploring the principles and dynamics of formal and informal governance rules, power relations, decision making and issue definition in partnership institutions.

How then should we understand social partnership? For some, the primary reference point remains corporatist institutions (Hardiman, 2000). For others, partnership is a thinly veiled cover for co-opting the population into a neo-liberal form of market governance, creating a form of "competitive corporatism" (O'Hearn, 2001; Kirby, 2002; Allen, 2000; Rhodes, 1998). Yet others point to the continuity between partnership and clientelism, arguing that the institutions are fundamentally anti-democratic (Ó Cinnéide, 1998).

However, some have argued that partnership institutions represent a distinctive institutional form that breaks significantly from historical practice (O'Donnell, 2000). Partnership institutions are said to embody new principles of democratic deliberation, where relations between the key political actors should be analysed in terms of mutual learning rather than strict political exchange (O'Donnell, 2000). Such relations of deliberation, learning and institutional experimentation are said to be central to the local area-based partnerships and to be particularly well suited to a Post-Fordist economy (Sabel, 1996).

The papers in this special issue step firmly into the middle of these debates. Maura Adshead argues that analyses of partnership have tended to subordinate the analysis of partnership itself to the analysis of broader phenomena such as the state or the "Celtic Tiger". This has meant that there is relatively little research that treats social partnership institutions in their own right. Furthermore, the primary international research literatures in this area – on policy networks and multi-level governance – have not been sufficiently integrated into an analytical framework for the analysis of these new partnership institutions. Adshead's paper develops a set of categories and dimensions along which partnership can be analysed as an institutional form of governance in its own right. If partnership is a distinctive and durable institutional form, Adshead expects that we should see greater integration over time along both its horizontal (community, voluntary and civil society participation) and vertical (multi-level state governance) dimensions.

Niamh Hardiman explores precisely this relationship between partnership institutions as horizontal forms of governance and policy making, incorporating a range of actors in policy deliberation and formation, and the vertical institutions of formal state governance. She argues that these dimensions are increasingly intertwined so that, while partisan politics and government authority can regularly trump partnership deliberations, partnership institutions have become part of the terrain of policy formation and consistently shape the kinds of policies that emerge and are implemented.

Joe Larragy examines the horizontal dimension of partnership in greater detail through his discussion of the shifting place of the community and voluntary pillar in partnership. Larragy suggests that part of the extension of

social partnership into social policy and the incorporation of the community and voluntary sector was due to a legitimation crisis brought on by the economic crises of the 1980s and the attendant problems of social marginalisation. While partnership institutions fell far short of the hopes of many in the sector, Larragy finds that the community and voluntary pillar significantly moderated neo-liberal tendencies in policy and placed issues such as unemployment and marginalisation on the partnership agenda. However, the influence of the C&V pillar largely depended on its moral standing and the legitimation that it could provide to partnership agreements – as growth has reduced unemployment the political value of that legitimacy has been weakened, and with it the power of the C&V pillar within partnership.

The remaining three papers explore partnership in local settings – urban, rural and sectoral (environmental). Mary Corcoran draws on comparative research on eight European cities, where urban partnership was pursued as an attempt to address the failure of urban economic regimes to tackle social exclusion. Dublin was the most successful of these cities in animating the commercial sector in urban development but fell somewhere between the most neoliberal (clientelist) and most social democratic (activist) urban partnership regimes. Corcoran finds that Irish urban partnerships escaped some of the worst features of clientelism but that their deliberation and representation was weaker than in cities such as Berlin and Copenhagen. While partnerships did prompt a degree of local development they remained weak in the face of global financial flows.

Tony Varley and Chris Curtin find a variety of forms and visions of rural partnership in Connemara West, understood as different forms of populist politics. They argue that while co-optation has been a danger for community groups seeking to effect change, the role partnerships have played in enhancing local capabilities for participation cannot be discounted. They argue that partnership can be a new and promising way of making and implementing social policy, but it depends upon sympathetic state allies to be able to do this. Further development of partnership as a democratic mode of governance would appear to require more secure funding that would provide a sound footing for partnerships in their dealings with state agencies and government departments.

Michael Murray explores this relationship between state and community in his research on the social dialogue around the proposal to locate an incinerator in Ringsend, County Dublin. He finds that the weakness of partnership serves to increase non-partnership politics. Partnership dialogue increased expectations of the political process but failed to deliver upon those expectations, generating a legitimation crisis in the partnership process itself – and ultimately making community resistance more, rather than less, likely.

He shows how, in the worst case scenario, partnership can be profoundly weakened as decision-making authority on incineration had been shifted to unelected officials before the process of social dialogue began.

III PARTNERSHIP, DEMOCRACY AND POLITICS

It is crucial that we study partnership institutions as forms of governance alongside markets, hierarchies and other organisational structures. Characterisations of the "partnership state" seem too all-encompassing as there are many different forms that partnership takes within the state, and many aspects of the Irish state that have little to do with partnership. The papers offer insights into the variety of forms of partnership, and the many intersections between partnership institutions and government departments, state agencies, local elites, employer and trade union associations, political parties, the EU, community organisations and other socio-political actors. The constant dialogue and struggle between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of partnership is central to the outcomes of partnership negotiations and processes.

Hardiman, Larragy and Varley and Curtin show that the institutional context for policy formation has been transformed in many ways by partnership institutions, particularly by broadening the range of channels available to get issues on the political agenda. However, party politics can still trump partnership institutions. Party politics may also favour partnership institutions as Joe Larragy shows in his discussion of how the Rainbow Coalition in the mid-1990s provided much greater freedom for the "democratic experimentalism" of partnership institutions (Sabel, 1996) and promoted the role of Combat Poverty and the National Economic and Social Forum in national policy making.

Varley and Curtin argue that local capabilities for participation can be enhanced and concessions can be won through partnership institutions. However, the question then becomes whether the concessions won are worth the constraints on political action that partnership places upon organisations. Co-optation of oppositional forces in society is always a possibility in such institutions. However, none of the papers finds a straightforward story of co-optation and control. Corcoran finds much of urban partnership to be aspirational but argued that local communities were also able to use partnership to their own ends at times. Furthermore, in other European cities, partnership was a vehicle for activism, suggesting that it may not be partnership but the political context within which it operates that influences whether it serves to co-opt or to mobilise. Varley and Curtin find that

community groups were able to exert as much influence as state agencies at times, although ultimate control still lay with the state. Murray found that the weaknesses of partnership discussions around environmental issues tended to produce oppositional politics arising out of disappointed political expectations and weakened political legitimacy. Partnership may co-opt but it may also facilitate mobilisation, multiply channels of policy formation and even produce new forms of opposition.

IV WHERE CAN PARTNERSHIP GO?

Corcoran (this volume) argues that partnership is a "…contested and contestable concept". However what may be surprising is that the concept has not been more contested in practice – we are missing a politics of partnership that goes beyond championing or rejecting partnership to considering how to re-shape and re-design its institutions.

Some observers have worried that lack of cohesion will undermine the bargain that has been struck over the past fifteen years (Roche, 1998). However, assessing partnership institutions in terms of their conformance to the model of cohesive hierarchical organisation may be misleading in many respects. International research has paid increased attention to the emergence of network forms of organisation, connecting multiple organisational units through lateral ties and overlapping hierarchies and incorporating multiple logics of organising (Powell, 1990; Stark, 1999). Such organisational forms can provide a quite different form of co-ordination than hierarchical systems of command and it has been suggested that at least some elements of the Irish policy regime correspond to such a model (Sabel, 1996; O'Donnell, 2000; Ó Riain, 2000, 2004). The evolution of partnership has been part of a broader evolution of network governance (Hardiman, this volume).

Charles Sabel's ideas of "bootstrapping reform" by utilising benchmarks of performance to stimulate deliberation and "learning by monitoring" have been influential in Ireland (Sabel, 1994, 1996). However, important questions remain regarding network forms of organisation, including the dynamics of network coordination, the power relations within them and the conditions under which they are most effective and most egalitarian. A sole reliance on networks to come up with creative solutions through deliberation may leave partnership institutions vulnerable to trumping by formal government authority when the deliberations become too awkward (e.g. the attempted transformation of local partnerships into service delivery rather than community development organisations; the attempts to constrain the C&V sector through new regulations that would restrict charitable status to non-

campaigning organisations, and so on). Varley and Curtin note how the power inequalities faced by a rural partnership due to its continued provisional funding may ultimately undermine the process of deliberation itself.

What is the answer? Michael Murray points out that partnership needs to incorporate an institutional design for democratic decision making. But which one? Devolving authority on a permanent basis to local partnerships, local authorities or other more decentralised agencies poses its own problems – including of localism, of capacity and of representation. It may be that partnerships, and other forms of policy networks, should have decision making authority devolved to them on specific issues and for specific lengths of time – providing a form of authority similar to commissions but with a structure of broader public participation, allowing for flexible network governance with protection from arbitrary elite interference. In recent years, the spaces for democratic deliberation that opened up in partnership institutions in the 1990s have been narrowed as demands for service delivery, the disciplining of community and voluntary organisations and the re-assertion of governmental control over partnership institutions have narrowed the vision and practice of partnership institutions. Given the pervasiveness and importance of partnership institutions and these threats to them as vehicles of democratic participation, these issues of institutional design of partnership governance have become central to the future of Irish democracy.

REFERENCES

ALLEN, K., 2000. *The Celtic Tiger? The Myth of Social Partnership* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

BARTLEY, B. and K. T. SHINE, 2002. "Competitive City: Governance and the Changing Dynamics of Urban Regeneration in Dublin" in E. Swyngedouw, F. Moulaert and A. Rodriguez (eds.), *Urbanising Globalisation: Urban Redevelopment and Social Polarisation in the European City*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 145-166.

FAGAN, H., D. O'HEARN, G. McCANN and M. MURRAY, 2001. "Waste Management Strategy: A Cross Border Perspective," NIRSA Working Paper Series 2a, National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA), NUI Maynooth, Ireland.

HARDIMAN, N., 1988 *Pay, Politics, and Economic Performance* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

HARDIMAN, N., 1994. "The State and Economic Interests: Ireland in Comparative Perspective" in J. H. Goldthorpe and C. T. Whelan (eds.), *The Development of Industrial Society in Ireland*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 329-358.

HARDIMAN, N., 2000. "Social Partnership, Wage Bargaining and Growth" in B. Nolan, P. O'Connell, C. T. Whelan (eds.), *From Bust to Boom*. Dublin: IPA/ESRI.

KIRBY, P., 2002. *The Celtic Tiger In Distress: Growth with Inequality in Ireland,* Basingstoke: Palgrave.

McCASHIN, A., E. O'SULLIVAN and C. BRENNAN, 2001. "The National Economic

and Social Forum, Social Partnership and Policy Formulation in the Republic of Ireland", *Policy & Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2, Bristol: The Policy Press.

MEADE, R., 2005. "We Hate it Here, Please Let Us Stay! Irish Social Partnership and the Community and Voluntary Sector's Conflicted Experience of Recognition", *Critical Social Policy*, Vol. 23, No. 3.

Ó CINNÉIDE, S., 1998. "Democracy and the Constitution", *Administration.* Vol. 46, No. 4, pp. 41-58.

O'DONNELL, R., 2000. "The New Ireland in the New Europe" in Rory O'Donnell (ed.), *Europe: The Irish Experience,* Dublin: IEA, pp. 161-214.

O'HEARN, D., 2001. *The Atlantic Economy: Britain, the US and Ireland,* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Ó RIAIN, S., 2000. "The Flexible Developmental State, Globalization, Information Technology and the 'Celtic Tiger'", *Politics and Society,* Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 3-37.

Ó RIAIN, S., 2004. *The Politics of High Tech Growth: Developmental Network States in the Global Economy,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

POWELL, W. W., 1990. "Neither Market Nor Hierarchy: Network Forms of Organisation" in B. M. Staw and L. L. Cummints, (eds.), *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 12, pp. 295-336.

POWELL, F. and M. GEOGHEGAN, 2004. *The Politics of Community Development*, Dublin: A. & A. Farmar.

RHODES, M., 1998. "Globalisation, Labor Markets and Welfare States: A Future of 'Competitive Corporatism'?" in M. Rhodes and Y. Meny (eds.), *The Future of European Welfare: A New Social Contract?* Palgrave Macmillan.

ROCHE, W., 1998. "Between Regime Fragmentation and Realignment: Irish Industrial Relations in the 1990s", *Industrial Relations Journal* Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 112-125.

ROCHE, W. K. and T. CRADDEN, 2003. "Neo-corporatism and Social Partnership" in M. Adshead and M. Millar (eds.), *Public Administration & Public Policy in Ireland*, London: Routledge.

SABEL, C., 1996. *Ireland: Local Partnerships and Social Innovation,* Paris: OECD.

SABEL, C., 1994. "Learning by Monitoring: The Institutions of Economic Development," in Neil Smelser and Richard Swedberg (eds.), *Handbook of Economic Sociology*, Princeton: Princeton University Press and Russell Sage Foundation, pp. 137-165.

STARK, D., 1999. "Heterarchy: Distributing Authority and Organizing Diversity," in John Clippinger III (ed.), *The Biology of Business: Decoding the Natural Laws of Enterprise.* Jossey-Bass.

TAYLOR, G., 2001. *Conserving the Emerald Tiger: The Politics of Environmental Regulation in Ireland*, Galway: Arlen Press.

TAYLOR, G., 1996. "Labour Market Rigidities, Institutional Impediments and Managerial Constraints: Some Reflections on the Recent Experience of Macro-Political Bargaining in Ireland", *The Economic and Social Review*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 253-277.

VARLEY, T. and C. CURTIN, 2002. "Community Empowerment via Partnership? in G. Taylor (ed.), *Issues in Irish Public Policy,* pp. 127-150, Irish Academic Press.

WALSH, J. A., 2000. "Dynamic Regional Development in the EU Periphery: Ireland in the 1990s" in P. Roberts, D. Shaw and J. Walsh (eds.), *Regional Planning and Development in Europe*, London: Ashgate, pp. 117-137.

WALSH, J., CRAIG, S. and D. MCCAFFERTY, 1998. *Local Partnerships for Social Inclusion?* Dublin: Oak Tree Press.