

A Mayor with teeth is worth delivering

I wasn't a fan of the proposed merger of Waterford's two local authorities, but from this juncture and given the size and population of the city and county, such a move now looks sensible. Well, hands up: since the councils were amalgamated, the sky hasn't fallen in and local government has continued to function, albeit without the funding stream it desperately needs in terms of delivering houses and employing more outdoor staff.

Given the overdue and welcome cross-county boundary emphasis on advancing the region, the more decisions which can collectively be made by local government ought to be advanced, supported and monetised.

And with that in mind, creating a more powerful public servant, elected by the people of Waterford, is surely a proposal that ought to be given due consideration. That the creation of a directly elected Mayor of Waterford, surely enhancing local democracy in the running city of and county affairs, appears off-putting to some sitting Councillors, strikes me as odd. After all, why would democrats be averse to further democracy?

What a directly elected Mayor could or could not do is spelled out in a 45-page Government document published on March 20th. Those averse to the proposal should take some solace from the fact that the new position would hold no individual sway over planning application approval, the allocation of social housing or the granting of licences or permits. Such responsibility would continue to fall under the Council Chief Executive's remit.

A directly elected Mayor would also not be legally permitted to exercise "a second casting vote when voting on a policy, plan, budget or other item that they have prepared and proposed to the elected council".

Again, this makes complete and total sense and it's encouraging to see that the document contains countermeasures to prevent such a Mayoralty becoming a self-serving and self-indulgent exercise on any office holder's behalf. My primary concern with this proposal, being driven by Ferrybank TD and Minister of State John Paul Phelan (FG), rests with the narrow window of discussion we've been afforded between now and the directly elected mayoral plebiscite on May 24th. At least three referenda are set to be held this autumn regarding the liberalisation of our divorce laws, extending Presidential election voting to Irish citizens abroad and amending the constitutional reference to the place of women in the home.

And while it might not suit some politicians to be out campaigning during the summer recess, an autumn plebiscite on the future Mayoralties of Waterford, Cork and Limerick would at least allow time for further debate. So why not hold such a vote in the autumn? What's the rush?

Because if this matter is defeated in all three Munster cities, one wonders what level of appetite will exist in terms of a further vote in due course, all the more so if there's a change in government.

And if voters in Waterford, which has a greater population living within an hour's driving time of it than either Cork or Limerick were to reject such a proposal, would this further disenfranchise our city when contrasted with our urban neighbours?

Far too much of the recent debate on the potential shape of the future Mayoralty has rested on the (still theoretical) office's salary. For the record, a Mayoral salary would be the equivalent of a current Minister of State, coming in at €129,854. The Mayor's vouched allowance would be €16,000, while a special advisor and programme officer would both be paid €66,741. Should the Mayor hire a driver, he/she would be paid €34,850, with the estimate for an individual local authority, combining all these costs, totalling €313,916.

At the very least, a full-time Mayor should be paid the equivalent of a Senator's salary (€66,940) but the idea that a Mayor should have a greater salary than the Taoiseach (a basic of €94,535 or €104,601 via an additional salaried allowance) is objectionable.

The suggestion that such a position would provide a platform for a future Mayor to seek election to the Dáil cannot be discounted. But so what? That's already proven the case with the late Eddie Collins, Martin Cullen and John Halligan to name but three.

The proposed salary would also surely serve as a disincentive for some seeking a Dáil or Seanad run given that the Mayoralty would pay better, while also allow one to work at home.

That a Mayor should have a small team of his/her own is entirely logical and has to be budgeted for, otherwise devising elements of a legislative agenda would be nigh on impossible.

I do not and never have seen an issue with a public servant with a heavy workload being paid appropriately. And if a directly elected Mayor is not effectively discharging their functions, the proposed legislation notes that the "elected council would initiate the removal process by passing a resolution to request the removal of the mayor from office, with the support of no less than 75% of the elected members". A 'double-lock' would be achieved in "seeking Ministerial confirmation of the elected council's decision to remove the mayor. The threshold involved is extremely high with the aim of ruling out vexatious or politically motivated resolutions to remove the mayor. It is also proposed that such a resolution could not be undertaken again within a six month period". A recall of the Mayor is also provided for in the March 20th document.

While I don't agree with the prospect of a rushed out and speedily articulated debate between now and May 24th, I fail to see what local government has to fear from the creation of a directly elected Mayor. Such an office would add primacy to Waterford's status as regional capital and would surely prove more effective than at least one of our sitting TDs.