

PARTNERSHIP: A SENSE OF PLACE

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Partnership is a very popular word nowadays. In Europe, it has been so for fifty years. In Northern Ireland, it has been so for a few years. And in Britain, it has been so for six weeks. It is nice to be showing the way for once.

But what do we mean by partnership? It is not about creating new institutions or new bureaucracies as detractors would argue. It is not about new ways of expressing old conflicts over the distribution of power and authority. It is rather a method of mobilizing all the energies in society so that everyone can play their constructive role in determining the future. It is a method of getting beyond traditional political divisions and ideological clashes. It is above all a way of getting people to say what they stand for, not what they are against.

Partnership involves bringing together political institutions and civil society. Elected representatives and public officials are not simply there to order society. They must cooperate with organizations who are not explicitly partisan - business, trade unions, the voluntary sector, educational institutions, as well as cultural bodies - in order to make the most use of the talents available to us. As I have often said, the only true wealth of a country is its people. I believe in our post-mass industrial society, that statement is getting truer and truer. The parable of the servants and the talents is totally in tune with the spirit of our times.

This is a truism well understood for several decades in Europe. For all its faults and for all the criticisms, the European Union has guaranteed an unprecedented period of peace and prosperity in our continent. It has done so by involving politicians, civil servants, business, unions, the voluntary sector and a plethora of other bodies in the daily work of the EU. By concentrating on consensus and collective action, the EU has substantially altered the previously catastrophic course of European history.

Before examining the nature of partnership in Northern Ireland, I want to spend a few minutes looking at possible future developments at the European level. Europe is now beginning the

process of reviewing its regional and social development policies. The present arrangements come to an end in 1999, so the European institutions are now looking at existing schemes to assess their effectiveness, to see what changes are necessary and what innovations should be introduced in the year 2000. It very much looks as if the principle of partnership, and the idea of local and regional partnerships, will play a key role in EU policy in the next century.

While there is a general consensus on the principle of European-wide action on regional and social development, an essential foundation of a genuine European union, there is much debate over the way those policies should be conducted. It is no secret that the operation of the regional development and social funds and of the Community Initiatives has raised some concerns.

In particular, the number of separate programmes and objectives has generated some confusion. There are fears of an excessively scatter-gun approach to the distribution. There are real administrative problems for European, national and local administrations caused by the complexity of existing policies. There is a growing consensus that there are too many objectives and sub-objectives under the structural funds. There is some concern that there are too many Community Initiatives. There is also pressure for simplification of the European Social Fund objectives. There is also some concern that the funds are not sufficiently targeted at the right areas and the right social groups.

Both the relevant Commissioners, Monika Wulf-Mathies and Pádraig Flynn have signaled their desire to simplify and concentrate. There will undoubtedly be a move to rationalise the number of objectives and to focus resources in a more geographically concentrated way. We can also expect a greater concentration on integrated local development, particularly in urban centres. It is clear that the Commission is intent on focussing on integrated urban development, as its recent proposals suggest.

At the same time, the improved coordination of regional and social funding has been a long-term objective of the European Union. This is likely to become a much higher profile issue in the

future, given the increasing emphasis both the Commission and the European Parliament are placing on value-for-money expenditure.

Furthermore, there will be a strong trend towards the simplification of procedures for implementation of policies. I know that the present procedures, particularly for payment, are the bete-noires of local authority finance officials. The good news is that the Finnish Commissioner now responsible for these matters feels the same way and is in the process of introducing reform. Administrative streamlining will be further advanced by the decentralizing pressures of subsidiarity introduced by the Maastricht Treaty. One can expect much more use made of global grants to intermediary bodies rather than the traditional rigid management systems.

All these pressures are converging, and converging in the direction of a much greater role for local partnerships in the future. I believe that future regional and social policy will have a strong emphasis on a sense of place.

The pressure towards more specific geographical targeting is going to enhance the local dimension of policy-making as will the subsidiarity principle. Greater coordination of policies is also going to require the presence of local structures drawing together all institutions and organizations involved in EU programmes in a particular area. Financial decentralization will also require efficient and rational cooperation between the various bodies in a particular area, especially in the management of global grants.

The sense of place is going to be vital. If we are to have integrated local development, we must have integrated local partnerships. It is blindingly obvious that if we have to draw up integrated local development plans, then it is essential to bring together all those with the ideas and responsibility for implementation. A kind of local GOSPLAN-style planning conducted by officials is no longer feasible. Participation has to be maximized.

I believe therefore that we are evolving towards a European Union in which a sense of place will be a defining characteristic. That would recognize the essential diversity of Europe. It would ensure that local partnerships are put into place capable of making efficient use of EU funding, playing an active and pro-active role in the development and implementation of European policies. Within broad guidelines set in, but not by, Brussels, we will be able to benefit from tailor-made policies adapted to local conditions.

Let me now turn to Northern Ireland's recent experience with local and regional partnership. I do not intend to give a history lesson, but in some parts of Northern Ireland, there has been a long-standing commitment to local partnership, both within local authorities and between local authorities and the other organized sectors of society. I am sorry but I cannot resist mentioning my own city - Derry.

But the big impetus to the concept of partnership has been the Special Community Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the border counties. Under the Initiative, one aspect of the programme has been the establishment of Partnership Boards charged with organizing some sub-programmes. Each local authority in Northern Ireland is a member of one of the 26 local boards, with a regional Board acting as the intermediary between Brussels and the 26 local boards. Business, unions, the voluntary sector are all represented.

No one can pretend that setting up these boards was easy. We are, as we are tragically aware, a deeply divided society. There were numerous party-political wrangles, government was not always entirely supportive and relations between the various sectors were sometimes uneasy. Mistakenly in my view, some local authorities suspected the notion of partnership as a device for undermining their status and powers when in fact it was something of a new lease of life. Nor can we pretend that the partnerships have eradicated dissensus and divisions over policies, let alone politics. But we do now have valuable mechanisms for the management of divergent views and for the replacement of sterile oppositionalism with creative tension.

Three years on, there is a remarkable political consensus in Northern Ireland on the value of the partnerships, recognised notably by President Santer's proposal to extend the life of the Special Initiative by a further two years.

Our experience here in Northern Ireland does, despite our special circumstances and difficulties, have a wider relevance from a general European point of view. Indeed, some might say that if we can create partnerships, anyone can. I would suggest that those of you from outside Northern Ireland might well find it useful to study in detail our partnership experience. I am sure your Northern Ireland colleagues will assist you to do so.

However, there is also another dimension of European relevance to our partnership experience. It has been an experiment in new ways of working for the EU itself. Thanks to the efforts of Commissioner Wulf-Mathies, the Special Initiative has been a radical departure from the tradition of project micro-management from Brussels. Instead, the Commission, Council and Parliament agreed broad guidelines, a more detailed operational programme was negotiated between the Commission and the two relevant governments and a large section of the programme administered locally by the partnership boards. The fact that such a major programme has been implemented successfully in this way is of great significance for the future administration of Europe. The Commissioner has therefore not only played a very valuable role in Northern Ireland, but has opened serious possibilities of administrative reform within the EU. I would also like to pay tribute to the imagination, determination, and innovative spirit of the Commission officials involved in the Special Community Initiative. I hope their colleagues and public officials across Europe will be able to learn from their experience in developing the new approach.

Clearly, the development of partnership as a system of administration has implications for public administration in general. If public administration is to successfully evolve in line with social and economic realities, new ways of working will be necessary for both institutions and those

working in them.

Local institutions must recognize that they are dealing with increasingly sophisticated citizens, who do not necessarily look to public institutions for solutions. It has to be accepted that local authorities are only parts of the wider society, not the society itself. Local authorities have to be inclusive. The partnership concept seems to me to allow local authorities to work with society, not on it.

The job of local authorities is not to defend status or prerogatives, it is to be at the heart of local communities, not above, outside or apart. They must be at the centre of local partnerships, mobilizing local communities to achieve their objectives. Partnership enhances, not diminishes. In a sense, it is like the EU itself. The pooling of resources, commitment and influence with other bodies expands the capacity to act for the common good.

Similarly, the traditional model of the detached public official carrying out tasks of regulation and management has to be supplemented. It is no longer enough to be efficient at giving and taking orders. The public official must be a builder of consensus, a motivator effective at channeling the energies of civil society.

Above all, the public official has a key role to play in providing the link between the local community and the global economy. His or her task is to widen local horizons to ensure that the vitally important sense of place does not become a place of seclusion.