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Electoral and Fiscal Geographies

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Ronan Paddison's political geography interests were wide-ranging. Although the bulk of Ronan's work focussed on other areas, he also made contributions on electoral and fiscal geographies. Work on the former book-ended his career. Some of his first published papers were on electoral matters, as was some of the last work he did. And his long-standing focus on urban politics led to an ongoing interest in funding the local state – and in the wider implications of that. What tied this work into the wider corpus of Ronan's activities was an interest in power. In this short paper, I take a look at some of his contributions in both areas.

Electoral geographies I: maps and power…

I well remember a conversation I had, as a callow final year undergraduate, with Ronan during the 1983 UK General Election campaign. The conversation took place – as was common then – in the pub after, if memory serves, a meeting of the Glasgow University Geographical Society (who was giving that evening's lecture, and what it was on, are sadly lost in the mists of time: reader, if you were the speaker, I apologise!). I fancied myself as a bit of a radical, and was holding forth on the prospects for Michael Foot's Labour party. Like some Labour supporters in more recent elections fought by more recent (and even more unelectable) Labour leaders, I argued (more in hope than anything else) that Foot could still beat Mrs Thatcher's Conservatives. After all the policies were so much more attractive than the Conservatives' offer. The Conservatives had presided over deep recession, high inflation and unemployment, and the hollowing out of manufacturing industry. Foot's rallies (against nuclear weapons, against unemployment, etc.) drew large and enthusiastic crowds. And the only poll that mattered was the final vote in election day itself. There was all to play for. Voters would be persuaded by the forces of light, reason and justice, and Mrs T would be swept from office, consumed by a crisis of capitalism her government's policies had done so much to exacerbate.

Ronan's response was gentle, but on the money: "I'm not so sure…". He then elaborated his reasons for (deep) scepticism regarding Labour's chances. There was a deep split on the centre-left between Labour and the Liberal-SDP Alliance. Michael Foot's personal ratings with voters were dire: he was seen variously as an unreconstructed member of the far left, as too old and infirm for the top job in UK politics, and even – for some on the left – as too much of a turncoat from the true path of socialism after his period in government under Wilson and Callaghan. Add to that the Falkland Effect, the beginning of economic recovery in the south and midlands, and the Conservatives'' massive 20-point poll lead, and the outcome was all but certain – a sweeping Conservative majority, a thumping Labour defeat (from the perspective of 2019/20, plus ça change…!).

Needless to say, Ronan was right, I was wrong. I'd taken to heart half of Gramsci's famous aphorism: optimism of the will. But Ronan knew this was no good unless tied to the other half – pessimism of the intellect. It was an object (though well taught and supportive – Ronan

discussed it as though between equals) lesson. Look the facts square in the face, and see them for what they are, not for what you hope they might be.

His analysis was based on his close interest in and attention to the political scene. But it also reflected real insight into how elections 'work': Ronan was one of the first geographers to take a close interest not just in electoral behaviour, but in the operation and effects of electoral laws. And, early in his career, while studying (for a postgraduate diploma in statistics at TCD) and working (as an assistant lecturer in geography at UCD) in Dublin in the mid-1970s, he used that insight to reveal the operation of political power behind the apparently arcane subject of electoral redistricting – redrawing the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies in order to address population change.

Unusually for a European state, Irish electoral politics was (and – at least until the 2020 General Election – still is) dominated by the struggle between two centre-right parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael (which trace their origins back to splits in the original Sinn Féin during Ireland's early 1920s civil war). Ireland used (and still uses) a quasi-proportional electoral system, the Single Transferable Vote (STV) for elections to the Dáil Éireann. It is very rare for one party to win a true majority (over 50%) of the vote in Irish elections. That has happened only twice since Irish independence – in 1938, when Fianna Fáil took 51.9% of the vote, and in 1977, when it won 50.6%. Because STV is quasi-proportional, this also means that single-party majority governments are relatively unusual. Between 1922 and 2020, there have been 30 General Elections. Only seven have produced one-party majorities (in 1922, 1938, 1944, 1957, 1965, 1969 and 1977). Every other contest (and every election since 1977) has resulted in either a minority or a coalition government.

So far, so unsurprising. Proportional election systems (in which the number of seats a party wins is proportional to its vote share) generally produce multi-party politics and coalition governments (Duverger, 1954; Lijphart, 1994; Norris, 2004), and STV is quasi-propositional. But the devil is in the detail, and the detail here turns on 'quasi'. STV contests can be manipulated in a number of ways to make them more or less proportional in their outcomes. Smaller parties, other things being equal, might favour greater proportionality, as this makes it easier for them to win MPs, and hence to gain potential leverage in coalition discussions. Larger parties, broadly speaking, will prefer less proportional outcomes, because when the smaller parties are squeezed, it is the larger ones which stand to gain.

To see how this might work (and how it might be manipulated), we need to look in a bit more detail at how STV works. STV elections are constituency-based contests, with MPs (Teachta Dála, or TDs, in Ireland) elected to represent particular areas. But each constituency returns several parliamentarians, and parties put up numerous candidates in each seat. Voters then rank the candidates (not, note, the parties: candidates from the same party in a seat are in competition with each other, as well as with candidates from other parties). The details of how candidate are then elected needn't detain us here: suffice it to say that the result are generally broadly proportional to the votes cast (considerably more so than in Westminster elections).

But (as Ronan recognised) just how proportional STV actually is in its outcomes is a function of how many MPs are elected in each seat (Paddison, 1974, 1976). On average, the more TDs elected from a constituency, the more proportional the overall election result there. The fewer

TDs elected, the less proportional the result. This, Ronan recognised, opens a means for unscrupulous political parties to try and manipulate STV to their benefit.

The opportunity to do so is produced by people's pesky tendency to be born, to move from place to place, and to die. Population geographies are continually changing: some areas experience (absolute or relative) population growth, while other suffer decline. At the same time, an underlying principle of most modern electoral systems is that every vote should be of equal value. In constituency-based systems, that is usually interpreted as meaning that every MP should represent more or less the same number of electors. Population change makes this problematic, however. Over time, and other things being equal, if nothing is done to rectify the situation, voters in constituencies experiencing (relative) population decline will find that their vote will start to carry more weight than the voters in constituencies experiencing (relative) growth.

Because of this, election systems which use electoral districts need, on a regular basis, to revisit the geography of their electoral districts in order to rebalance the populations. In single-member constituency first-past-the-post systems like those used for Westminster elections in the UK, or for the House of Representatives in the US, this requires that constituency boundaries are periodically redrawn to take account of population change. That opens the door to the electoral abuse of gerrymandering, in which boundaries can be manipulated to partisan advantage. Where the party in government controls the redistricting process, as in many states of the USA (Monmonier,2001; McGann *et al*., 2016), this can be a major problem seriously distorting the translation of votes into seats. Where – as in the UK – the process is handled by non-partisan bodies, deliberate gerrymandering is much less of an issue (Rossiter *et al*., 1999; Johnston *et al*., 2020).

It is sometimes (naively) assumed that PR systems are impervious to gerrymandering, as seat shares reflect vote shares. As Ronan's work on Irish STV in the late 1960s and early 1970s shows, however, this is not true. In fact, under STV rules, there are two routes to achieving a gerrymander: the 'traditional' one of exactly where on the ground the boundaries of a constituency are drawn; and, as an alternative, how large constituencies are allowed to become – and hence how many MPs/TDs they need in order to approximate to equal numbers of voters per MP. The latter route 'works' because of that link between the number of MPs elected and the proportionality of the result. Parties might want smaller STV constituencies in areas where they are electorally strong. If three MPs are elected for a seat in such an area, the strongest party in the area has a good chance of winning two of them, even if its support is substantially below 66%. But where a party is electorally weaker, it would benefit from greater proportionality in the allocation of votes to seats (and hence would prefer larger seats electing more MPs), raising its chances of gaining at least one of those MPs.

Before 1977, Irish electoral redistricting was controlled by the incumbent government, with all the temptation for gerrymandering, through both routes that entailed (Kavanagh, 2014). Ronan's work on redistricting to the early 1970 showed the process in operation. First, the average number of TDs elected per constituency decreased over time, reducing the overall proportionality of the system, and disadvantaging smaller parties. After the 1923 redistribution, the average number of TDs returned per seat was 5.1. Constituencies returned between 3 and 9 TDs. Just under three-quarters of them (electing just under 84% of all TDs) returned more than 3 TDs. After the 1973 redistricting, the average number of TDs per

constituency was down to 3.5. The great majority of seats (62%, electing 53% of all TDs) returned just 3 members. And no seat elected more than 5 TDs.

To understand the partisan story here, though, one has to appreciate just where the larger and smaller constituencies tended to be placed. Fianna Fáil has been the dominant party of government in Ireland for much of the last 100 years, in power (either by itself or as the largest party in a coalition) for 60 of them. Every redistricting between 1926 (when the party was founded) and 1969 (the penultimate of those included in Ronan's analysis) took place under an FF government (and the party had generally been successful in its gerrymanders: Parker, 1986; McKee, 1983). Ronan looked in more depth at the 1969 redistricting, which produced the constituencies used in that year's election for the 19th Dáil. Where FF was strong locally (for instance, in Galway and Clare), 3-member constituencies were the norm after each redistricting. In such places, FF stood to win 2 of the 3 TDs, generally a somewhat higher proportion than its vote share might imply. In Galway West, for instance, FF took 54% of the first preference vote, and 2 out of the 3 TDs. But where the party was electorally somewhat weaker (as, for instance, in Dublin and in many of the eastern counties), larger, 4- and 5-TD constituencies were more common, as the slightly greater proportionality promised the party a decent return to its lower support, while denying its stronger trials a much as possible of the 'exaggerating' effect of less proportional contests. In Dublin South West, Labour (with 44.3% of the first preference votes) pushed FF into second place (with 33.8%), but both gained 2 of the 4 TDs.

Nor was the malpractice restricted to FF-dominated governments (they indulged more often purely because they were in office longer, and had more opportunity, and they tended to be effective gerrymanderers, benefitting from their redrawn boundaries). When in office, their rivals were also not averse to a bit of electoral manipulation. One of the best-known examples (ironically, because it failed to achieve its goal: the government lost the subsequent election) was the so-called 'Tullymander' attempted in 1974 by a Fine Gael-Labour coalition (the name is a play on gerrymander and the name of the minister responsible, Labour's James Tully). The redistricting exercise tried to capitalise on Fine Gael and Labour strength in the Greater Dublin area by creating as many 3-TD seats there as possible. Unfortunately for the two parties, the scheme backfired when FF did better than anticipated in the area at the next (1977) General Election – turning the 3-TD districts to its relative advantage and winning the election. (FF also did better than expected in the west of Ireland, enabling it to pick up 3 TDs in a number of the 4-TD seats there.)

The Tullymander was particularly egregious, and particularly unsuccessful (an object lesson in voters' capacity to have the last laugh). It was also the last hurrah for deliberate gerrymandering in Ireland. Subsequent redistrictings were handed to independent Constituency Commissions from 1980 onwards (a move enshrined in legislation in 1997).

Fiscal Geographies

For much of his career, Ronan's research interests were in the aspects of political and urban geography, several of which are discussed in other papers in this collection. During the 1980s, for instance, he became fascinated by another ostensibly niche, but actually very revealing, area: local government finance (Bailey and Paddison, 1988; Paddison and Bailey, 1988).

Much of the impetus for this shift in focus came from a long-running dispute in the UK between some local and national governments. During the 1980s, several left-leaning Labour local councils in some of Britain's largest cities put themselves on a collision course with the Conservative government led by Mrs Thatcher. The government was committed to rolling back the state, reducing public spending and tax burdens, and moving increasingly to market-led private sector solutions to social problems (Kavanagh, 1987; King, 1987). A group of Labour councils, dominated by the so-called 'new urban left', meanwhile, challenged this policy direction and tried to establish a local alternative, focusing more on state intervention, public spending, and a variety of radical initiatives for community empowerment (Gyford, 1985; Blunkett and Jackson, 1987).

The 'new urban left' local authorities presented a major challenge to Thatcherism, not least in terms of their refusal to accept cuts in public sector expenditure. This in turn spurred the government to a variety of measures aimed at bringing the councils, and their budgets, back under central control. The previously slightly arcane world of local government finance became a major locus of political struggle. At the time, local authorities' funding was derived from two sources: a local property tax (the 'rates') set and levied by each local authority; and funds from central government, particularly the Rate Support Grant. The Rate Support grant was provided on the grounds that local governments would be unable to meet their statutory spending obligations from their own local tax revenues, and so needed some form of 'top-up' subvention from central government. This was particularly pressing for less affluent local authorities, where the gap between the local tax base and local demand for services was liable to be particularly acute. Many of these authorities were urban, and Labour-controlled.

Public spending incurred by these local authorities challenged central government's policy of reducing the size of the public sector. Attempts to limit Rate Support Grant payments to councils resulted in some raising more money from their local tax base. That in turn challenged central government policies on tax reduction, and was perceived by Conservative ministers as an attack in property owners, an important Conservative-voting constituency. Throughout the 1980s, local government finance therefore became a political battleground. Successive efforts were made by central government to curb local spending, local tax raising powers, and local government discretion, through measures such as limiting the RSG, implementing legislation to cap council's budget and prevent 'over-spending' – hence limiting the amount local rats would increase by (so called 'rate capping') and even extending to the abolition of the Greater London Council and the large Metropolitan counties. Many Labour local authorities, meanwhile, acted to circumvent as far as possible the measures being put in place by the government – even, in one or two cases, to the brink of breaking the law.

For many senior Conservatives, attempts to control local authorities' capacity to continually raise local property taxes did not go far enough in imposing fiscal discipline on local councils. The problem, they felt, was that the burden of the domestic rates fell disproportionately on some households and not on others. Domestic rates were levied against properties, and the amount to be paid was related to the notional rental value of the property, not to the occupants' income (though there were rebate schemes for the less well off) or to the number of people living in a property. A common Conservative trope was of the single pensioner living in a house they had bought many years before, facing the same rates bill as the large family living in the neighbouring property. What is more, those living in cheaper

properties, a paid lower rates, other things being equal, than those in more expensive properties. And because of rebate schemes, some local citizens were not liable for the rates at all. This, senior Conservatives argued, weakened the link between taxation and public spending. Labour councils could, they felt, over-spend safe in the knowledge that their voters would not be the people picking up the bill, and hence would have no incentive to demand that the council spend wisely and prudently.

In an attempt to cut the Gordian Knot of local government finance and to impose fiscal responsibility on councils, the Conservative government began to explore other ways of raising local taxes. A front-runner soon emerged: a 'community charge', levied as a flat-rate tax on all adults living in a local authority area. All would pay the same – and hence all would have an incentive to hold their local authority to account for its spending (and local authorities would curb their spending and taxing for fear of a voter backlash). The proposed new tax soon became known pejoratively as the 'poll tax' (Butler *et al*, 1994).

What is more, the rating system required occasional re-rating exercises, in which the changing renal values of properties used to set rates bills were re-assessed. Such exercises tended to be politically difficult for governments, as they often resulted in (highly unpopular) increases in individual rates bills. One response was therefore to avoid re-rating exercises as much as possible. But in 1985, just such an exercise was carried out in Scotland. It proved (predictably) massively unpopular. Scottish Conservative politicians found themselves fielding angry constituents whose rates bills had jumped overnight. Fearful of a potential voter backlash, they lobbied the government to move faster on introducing an alternative to the rates. The government obliged, introducing the poll tax in Scotland in 1989, a year earlier than in the rest of the country. For the record, this was not (as it often supposed) a heartless London government experimenting on an unloved outpost. On the contrary, it was a response to a (misplaced) request for help and support from Scottish Conservatives.

Ronan's interests in local government finance, urban politics and (a constant) in Glasgow coalesced as the poll tax rolled out. One of the effects of the new tax was that it radically shifted the burdens of payment for local government services – and that shifting burden had a very pronounced geography. Ronan used Glasgow to illustrate the point (Paddison, 1989).

Although the new tax was (give or take some details) a flat rate imposed on all adults – and to that extent equitable in its intent – it was highly inequitable in its outcomes and effects. Using the roll-out of the community charge in Glasgow as a case study, Ronan demonstrated how this played out over space. Moving from the property-based rates to the poll tax was beneficial for middle class home owners. But it increased tax burdens – sometimes substantially – for the less affluent. In part this was because payments fell for individuals living in more affluent areas whose properties had incurred relatively high rates, while they rose for individuals living in areas where rateable values had been lower. Partly, too, it was because the new tax was paid by almost all: individuals – often in poorer communities – who had previously received substantial rebates on the rates now found themselves liable for the new local tax. Glasgow's geography of winners and losers from the new tax mapped onto the city's geography of more and less affluent areas. In some middle class suburbs, like Newlands, average household local government tax bills fell. In some poorer wards – such as Easterhouse, Anderston, Calton, and Dennistoun, tax burdens jumped substantially. "In effect", he noted, the shift to the poll tax "means a net transfer from 'poor' to 'rich' areas"

(Padddison, 1986, 17). These average shifts, he went on, hid even more substantial variations at the level of individual households. Factors such as the number of adults loving in each household had a large effect on exposure to the new tax. Far from being an equitable shared burden, the new tax would be regressive and in some ways arbitrary in its impacts – hardly a recipe for widespread support.

And so it proved. The new tax proved a deeply unpopular electoral liability for the Conservatives, and was soon withdrawn. But Ronan's focus on winner and losers made a wider point. Fiscal geographies have real consequences which interact with geographies of affluence and deprivation, raising issues of inequality and power. As he pointed out in his analysis of the poll tax in Glasgow, inequities were not restricted to how much households and individuals might pay relative to their resources. They also extended to more general issues of well-being.

Electoral Geographies 2: From community power to Brexit geographies

Ronan's work on both electoral and fiscal geographies chimed with his interest in questions of community and political representation. This also surfaced in his work on community politics and power. Whereas gerrymandering and the introduction of inequitable new tax regimes were imposed on unwilling citizens, alternative forms of political action and engagement which raised the possibility of active grassroots involvement and bottom-up solutions were also possible. Initiatives for increased local democracy were a long-term focus of his work, from studies of community councils in Glasgow (Paddison, 1981), through analyses of neighbourhood and urban social movements (Paddison, 1985), to work on federalism and the decentralisation of power (as discussed, *inter alia*, in Paddison, 1983).

Widening and deepening participation was neither easy nor unproblematic, he recognised. Tensions exist over how much control might be ceded (and how much retained) by more central authorities to more local organisations. Shelley Arnstein's 'ladder of participation' (1969), though "too dogmatic and limited" (Paddison, 1985, 229) was a warning: while some forms of participation represented a real transfer of power, others smacked of tokenism and co-optation. But community empowerment was both possible and (general) desirable. What is more, it could be fostered by the provision of suitable opportunity structures and confidence-building exercises, in poorer as well as in more affluent communities (Docherty, Goodlad and Paddison, 2001). But, throughout, it was meaningful participation that mattered.

An example of problematic participation forms the basis of some of Ronan's most recent work, on the geographies of the United Kingdom's Brexit vote (Paddison and Rae, 2017; Boyle, Paddison and Shirlow, 2019). What could be more democratic and less problematic than to put a major issue, the UK's future relationship with the European Union, to a public vote in a referendum? But – as Ronan's work on community participation and empowerment demonstrated – the devil is in the detail. The Brexit debate generated heat, but little light. The referendum result, far from providing resolution, proved polarising. The geography of the referendum pitted communities and countries, as well as leavers and remainers, against each other. The divergent paths followed by Scottish (and Northern Irish) voters on one hand, and English and Welsh voters on the other, was a case in point (Paddison and Rae, 2017). While a majority of the former voted by wide margins to remain in the EU, a majority of the latter voted to leave. A focus on the UK-wide majority exacerbated territorial divides between the UK's constituent countries. The power-politics of the Brexit vote had a geographical

expression, and may yet have geographical effects – not least for the continued integrity (or not) of the UK.

Conclusions

It does intrigue me that studies of electoral geography bookend, in some respects, Ronan's research career. I wouldn't want to argue – and I am sure Ronan wouldn't want to claim – that elections were central to his scholarly interests. Yet – along with his work on fiscal geographies – his electoral work does speak to his wider interests. A clear thread running through this and his other work, it seems to me, is a concern for the exercise of political power, how that is manifested over, and produced by processes in, place and over space, and what effects it has on people's lives. Ronan took political participation seriously, both as an object of academic analysis and as an act of citizenship. Understanding it requires attention not only to the formal, but also to the informal structures within which it operates and is constrained, to how those structures can be manipulated for good or ill, and to their consequences. But easy solutions are not (generally) available. The world is complex, messy and perverse. As Ronan pointed out: "achieving a balance between economic competitiveness and social cohesion within governmental systems which simultaneously are scalar-responsive and accountable remains a prime, if elusive, goal" (Paddison 2002, 19). It is certainly true that, "…we do not always check…that citizens want the type of involvements that governments offer (or impose upon) them; and that the local democracy, public service improvement and local social-and-economic development agendas are compatible with each other" (Kearns and Paddison, 2000, 849). But, as Ronan argued throughout his career, we should!

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