

Resistant to reform: the problem of governance in Ireland

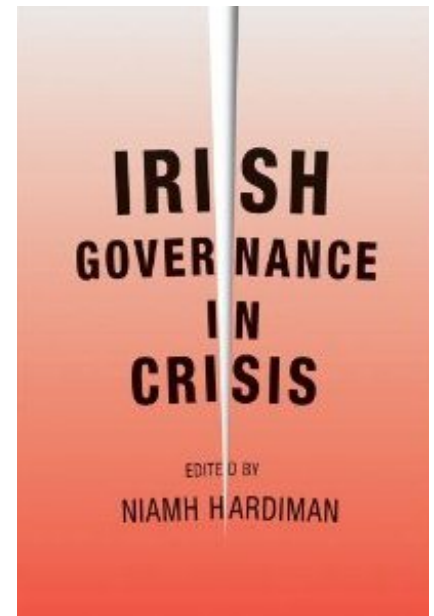
*Ireland's rapid shift from economic success story to recession casualty left many to rethink the country's relationship to Europe. However, **Irish Governance in Crisis** argues that the downturn in the economy exposed failures in governance within the country itself which remain resistant to change. The book's focus on these systemic problems, finds **Mary Murphy**, offers an important, but depressing lesson for those interested in meaningful and effective reform.*



Irish Governance in Crisis. Niamh Hardiman. Manchester University Press. April 2012.

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It is now incontrovertible that globalisation and Europeanisation restrict national manoeuvrability. However this book is a sobering reminder that many of the fault lines of the Irish political economy lie internally in Irish political institutions and culture. The interaction of Irish political institutions, interests in political parties and elite civil society and ideologies produced the unsustainable Irish variety of capitalism that collapsed so spectacularly in 2008. Taking a very useful middle range historical institutional approach, this book argues that Irish institutions and interest formations are not only problematic but are also resilient and resistant to meaningful reform. The book's core offering is a theoretical and empirical analysis of how institutional and policy change often fails, a depressing lesson for those interested in meaningful and effective reform.



The book includes very useful introduction and conclusion chapters by the editor and nine other chapters from highly respected authors in a diverse variety of disciplines and policy areas. This makes for a robust and meaningful publication and a significant contribution to the debate about the urgent need to reform Irish governance. It is essentially a book of two halves, macro-governance issues in chapters 1-5 and a set of 5 chapters dealing with specific policy areas. A core theme of these latter chapters is the dysfunctional relationship between highly centralised government and weak sub-national governance.

All the chapters are worthy of attention. It is an indication of how fast things change in this crisis that there have already been failed attempts at addressing fault lines identified in the book. MacCartaigh in Chapter 2 concludes there is no escape from the need to strengthen the quality of work of the legislature –what might he have made of the lost opportunity in the 2012 failed referendum to strengthen parliamentary investigative powers.

Westrup's chapter on regulatory governance might well have been titled 'regulatory capture' highlighting as it does the difficulty of implanting a regulatory regime, often imposed by EU directive, into a dysfunctional political culture prone to sectional vetoes. Dellepiane and Hardiman focus on the triple crisis of financial, fiscal and competitiveness and highlight the role of taxation in the Irish growth model. Its focus on short term electoral pump priming underscore how Irish political and electoral culture impact negatively on Irish capacity for both fiscal policy adjustment and relative cost adjustment. This has implications for the challenge of managing ever tighter fiscal constraints on the 2012 fiscal treaty.

Have Irish political parties or the electorate absorbed these lessons? The nature of oppositional discourse relating to household charges, property taxes and the fiscal treaty referendum suggest not. McGraw's insightful piece on the art of party politics in contemporary Ireland was written before the seismic 2011 general election and is thus unfortunate in timing but his analysis helps explain the absence of any new political party or force emerging from the volatility of that 2011 election.

Five chapters examine specific policy areas; health (Finn and Hardiman); environment and waste (Laffan and O'Mahony); urban governance (Payne and Stafford); crime and security (Mulcahy) and governance (Komito). Common to policy areas as diverse as health, waste and e-governance is the paradox of highly centralised governance and localised multi-seat constituencies.

The Proportional Representation Single Transferable Vote Irish electoral system 'creates a political opportunity structure in which it is easy for local opposition to be mobilised and effective' (Laffan and O'Mahony), this reinforces vetos and 'localised flashpoints' which means reform is often characterised by 'drift' (Finn and Hardiman). Irish solutions too often bypass the structural problem by establishing quangos (Payne and Stafford). Issues of 'local capacity' dominate (Mulcahy) and Komito appears relatively pessimistic about government's willingness to use new technologies to enhance either capacity or citizen participation.

The book reinforces conclusions about incapacity in the Wright report on the Department of Finance; this incapacity appears to be systemic and linked to underlying dysfunction of core institutions. The gap between policy and implementation has been described elsewhere as 'implementation deficit disorder'. Should Hardiman update this volume she will have numerous cases studies of contemporary incapacity including household charges, septic tank inspection, turf cutting, health reform, and construction standards. Hardiman concludes strongly 'both the policy effectiveness and the democratic legitimacy of the Irish state and governance practices are in question'.

It is curious that despite a significant focus about the fault lines of the electoral system there is no examination of this key institution from a reform perspective nor is there enough focus on devolution or local government reform. A missing lens of this book and most analysis of Irish governance is the absence of any gender analysis of Irish institutions and political culture, a pity given the contribution to the crisis and the corrective need for more women in senior decision making.

Hardiman makes four recommendations: legislative reform to strengthen capacity of parliament, recruitment to the executive, more effective delegated governance and more accountable public sector management are meaningful. There has been progress towards some reform. Hardiman's recommendation for a Fiscal Council was adopted in 2010. However, the 2012 Constitutional Convention will focus on relatively minor reforms (lowering voting age and decreasing the presidential term to five years). This does not inspire confidence that the need for systemic and value led political reform have been absorbed by the political elite. A shame given domestic institutions determine national capacity to mediate the ever powerful impact of neoliberal globalisation.

Mary P. Murphy lectures in Irish Politics and Society in the Department of Sociology, National University of Ireland Maynooth. She primarily works in the field of political sociology and has interests in globalisation and welfare states; the politics of redistribution; power and civil society and gender and social security. She has published widely, her most recent publication (with Peadar Kirby) is *Towards the Second Republic: Irish Politics after the Celtic Tiger* (Pluto Ireland, 2011). Prior to academic life she worked full time in social justice campaigning groups and continues to be an active public advocate for social justice. [Read more reviews by Mary.](#)

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