



# Transport policy and governance in turbulent times: Evidence from Ireland



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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates transport policy in the Republic of Ireland<sup>1</sup> before, during and after the ‘Celtic Tiger’ era (1995–2007), to capture how the prevailing governance system responded to rapid economic, political, and social changes. We argue that a detailed record of changes in Irish transport policy and governance during these turbulent times can offer lessons that are relevant to sustainable transport efforts internationally. Focusing on the development, introduction and subsequent implementation of two transport policy milestones, this paper considers political and institutional conditions that paved the way for both a high-cost approach to transport infrastructure development prior to the financial crisis in 2008 and the subsequent shift in policy discourse towards ‘smarter’ more sustainable travel following the rapid deterioration of public finances in the late 2000s. It then asks what changes (if any) are needed to current political-institutional structures to ensure future implementation of these declaratory commitments to sustainable transport. The concluding section explores whether it would be possible, or indeed desirable, to put current transport policy responses to the economic crisis on a more permanent footing, with a view to advancing the sustainable transport agenda, and uncovers opportunities to promote and implement sustainability initiatives in times of financial restraints.

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## 1. Introduction

During the twentieth century the car became an indispensable mobility tool facilitating both traditional and novel forms of social and economic activity. In many developed countries people’s everyday spatial mobility, such as their commute to work or leisure activities, frequently depend on access to a private car (Rau and Hennessy, 2009; Rau and Vega, 2012). At the same time, the disadvantages of car-dependent transportation systems for society and the environment have been well documented (Cahill, 2010; McDonald and Nix, 2005; Vigar, 2002; Whitelegg, 1997). Ireland has repeatedly been classified as one of the most car-dependent European countries (Campaign for Better Transport, 2011; Commins and Nolan, 2010) and transport-related exclusion experienced by car-less rural and urban households remains a

significant problem (Commins and Nolan, 2010; Wickham, 2006). For instance, driving cessation due to ill health or visual impairment is a major issue for older people in rural Ireland, and this leads to a significant decrease in relative mobility (Ahern and Hine, 2015). This has led to recognition that “if we continue with these trends in transport and travel we will all suffer individually and the economy and society as a whole will suffer” (Department of Transport, 2009: 7).

Interestingly, increasing car dependence coincided with the emergence of a view of extensive car use and the resulting unsustainable ‘consumption of distance’<sup>2</sup> as unavoidable consequences of successful economic and social development that should be either welcomed or at least tolerated. While some disagree with this position, in particular those arguing for more sustainable alternatives to the car, many local authorities and

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth referred to as Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of ‘consumption of distance’ highlights the importance of individuals’ consumption patterns as well as their dependence on material- and energy-intensive aspects of production that underpin transport systems in many developed countries, including Ireland.

business organisations continue to push an agenda of road construction that fuse increased car use with economic growth.<sup>3</sup> This starkly contrasts with international comparative transport research which highlights the significance of governance and power structures in the development of transport systems, thereby questioning the apparent inevitability of private car use and associated infrastructure development (cf. Newman and Kenworthy, 2000; Vigar, 2002). For example, socio-political particularities of places with comparable levels of prosperity produce vastly divergent patterns of how (much) people travel (Campaign for Better Transport, 2011; Rajanti and Wickham, 2002; Wickham, 2006). As Wickham (1999: 2–3) observes:

[u]rban car systems are *socially shaped*. The range of variation that we find between European cities requires a socio-political explanation. Conversely, explanations which treat car dependency as the automatic consequence of economic level or population density must be rejected (emphasis in original).

This paper builds on this line of inquiry. Using Ireland as a case study, it demonstrates how key political decisions regarding transport policy, planning, and investment shape a country's transport system, thereby challenging predominantly economic perspectives on transport policy formation and implementation.

Given the European Union's stated commitment to a more sustainable system of transport infrastructure and services that connects its member-states, facilitates trade and helps reduce harmful emissions from the transport sector (European Commission, 2011), we believe lessons from one of its most car-dependent member-states can open up fruitful avenues for debate and policy changes. But what makes Ireland a good case study and how does it compare with other developed countries, especially in Europe? Three aspects stand out. Firstly, Ireland's recent 'boom-to-bust' economic history can be seen as exceptional in terms of its scale and trajectory. At the same time, this exemplifies boom-bust cycles more generally, especially their impact on public spending. A rapid succession of spending sprees and freezes in the transport sector illustrates this. A marked increase in Irish government spending on transport infrastructure during the 'Celtic Tiger' boom times from late 1990s until mid-2000s, which coincided with a lack of coherent transport and land use policies, perpetuated car dependency created significant legacy issues. These include a growing need for cost-intensive transport infrastructure maintenance, especially in relation to roads, the creation and/or reinforcement of hierarchies of transport 'winners' and 'losers' (Rau and Vega, 2012), as well as consistently high greenhouse gas emissions from the transport sector (Environmental Protection Agency, 2014). This was followed by low-cost, sustainable transport interventions that coincided with the recession in the late 2000s and the subsequent deterioration of public finances. Against the backdrop of rather crude, broad-brush public debates regarding the effects on Irish society of both sudden wealth during the 'Celtic Tiger' and austerity measures during the recession, this paper shows how changes in the funding and policy landscape regarding transport can produce divergent outcomes that may or may not benefit society and the environment. As is shown throughout the paper, the lessons learnt do not only apply to Ireland but are also internationally significant.

Secondly, recent changes in the country's political system combine some unique features, including strong centralisation,

weak and under-resourced local authorities and a long tradition of clientelism, with developments that mirror international trends. Central government dominates public life while local government remains extremely weak, and it is a widely held view that Ireland retains a highly centralised tradition of governance and decision-making (Jacobson and Kirby, 2006). At the same time, the recent emergence of more complex modes of multilevel governance in Ireland represents an adaptive response to the challenges of globalisation (McGuirk, 2000). Larragy and Bartley (2007: 197–198) maintain that "Ireland has become a veritable laboratory for experimentation with new governance arrangements both with and beyond government systems" and the sphere of political action has expanded beyond the realm of traditional government politics and bureaucracy to encompass a broader range of stakeholders or interest groups. As is discussed later, transport policy-making reflects these new arrangements, and a better understanding of its nature and trajectory within a shifting financial environment can offer internationally relevant insights.

Third, the paper makes an important contribution to the rapidly growing international body of sustainable transport research by connecting transport policy initiatives that explicitly support sustainability goals with broader social and economic conditions that may or may not foster sustainability thinking and practice. For example, the onset of the global financial crisis in the late 2000s coincided with a shift in discourses within Irish transport policy design towards a hierarchy of 'smarter', more sustainable alternatives, although the extent to which these have been comprehensively carried through is debateable. These ranged from the promotion of low-carbon modes such as walking and cycling and enhanced efficiencies in motorised transport to proposals for reducing transport demand by people and goods through (re-) localisation and improved land use policies, although the latter is rarely put into practice. This emphasis on sustainable transport followed a period of large-scale, high-cost transport infrastructure development and appeared to signal a sea-change in transport policy thinking towards 'soft' measures such as workplace and school travel plans and awareness campaigns to 'green' people's travel practices (cf. Cairns et al., 2004: for a detailed report on the use and effectiveness of similar 'soft' interventions in the UK).

With a focus on environmental concerns and sustainability, this paper examines recent developments in Irish transport policy, specifically the dominance of car-centric thinking facilitated by particular inter-linkages between policy developments, institutional structures, and wider social and economic conditions. Centring on two major policy milestones—namely the €34 billion *Transport 21* investment programme (2006–2010) and *Smarter Travel* (2009–present)—it maps the institutional, socio-cultural and economic setup that has shaped Irish transport policy and practice since the mid-1990s. This is intended to meet two objectives: (1) to capture the unique transport policy landscape in Ireland before and after the 'Celtic Tiger' and, (2) to establish whether recent commitments to 'smarter' travel mark a genuine paradigm shift underpinned by institutional restructuring rather than a temporary suspension of car-centric thinking due to economic pressures. Our explicit focus on policy actors and institutions allows for the identification of opportunities for, and barriers to, more sustainable transport beyond economic and technological factors.

Initially, the paper covers key milestones in Irish transport policy, focusing on developments in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that fostered high car dependency, followed by recent efforts to find more sustainable alternatives. The emergence of a particular institutional setup that coincided with these policy developments is then outlined. Here, the ever-changing flow of power and influence between government and non-governmental policy actors, including Quasi-Autonomous

<sup>3</sup> In their submission to the government's policy document *Investing in our Transport Future—A Strategic Investment Framework for Land Transport*, Galway Chamber of Commerce, for example, maintain that 'a natural consequence of an improving economy is that there will be more cars on the road' (Galway Chamber, 2014: 3).

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