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Title	Transport policy and governance in turbulent times: Evidence from Ireland
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Publication Date	2015-12-08
Publication Information	Rau, H., Hynes, M., Heisserer, B. (2015) 'Transport policy and governance in turbulent times: Evidence from Ireland'. Case Studies on Transport Policy, .
Publisher	Elsevier
Link to publisher's version	http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2213624X15300201
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/5484
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cstp.2015.11.006

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Transport Policy and Governance in Turbulent Times: Evidence from Ireland

ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates transport policy in the Republic of Ireland[1] 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.

Keywords: Transport Policy, Governance, Ireland, Mobility, 'Celtic Tiger', Recession.

DRAFT

[1] Henceforth referred to as Ireland.

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 & Hennessy, 2009; Rau & Vega, 2012). At the same time, the disadvantages of car-dependent transportation systems for society and the environment have been well documented (Whitelegg, 1997; Vigar, 2002; McDonald & Nix, 2005; Cahill, 2010). Ireland has repeatedly been classified as one of the most car-dependent European countries (Commins & Nolan, 2010; Campaign for Better Transport, 2011) and transport-related exclusion experienced by car-less rural and urban households remains a significant problem (Wickham, 2006; Commins & Nolan, 2010). 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 & 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'[2] 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 business organisations continue to push an agenda of road construction that fuse increased car use with economic growth.[3] 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 & 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 (Rajanti & Wickham, 2002; Wickham, 2006; Campaign for Better Transport, 2011). 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 demonstrations how key political decisions regarding transport policy, planning, and investment shape a country's transport system, thereby challenging predominantly economistic 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

[2] 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.

[3] 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).

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 & 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 & 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 Non-Governmental Organisations (QUANGOs) with multi-billion budgets, private industry, transport unions, lobby groups, and civil society organisations, receives attention. Subsequently, we examine claims of a shift towards more sustainable transport thinking and practice since 2009, asking if the institutional setup that underpinned pre-2009 car-centric transport policy thinking has actually changed. The concluding section critically explores whether it is possible, or indeed desirable, to put current responses to the economic crisis on a more permanent (institutional) footing, with a view to advancing the sustainable transport agenda in the long term.

2. Methodology

The methodology comprised of an extensive desk study of publicly available documents covering major developments in the transport policy arena since the mid-1990s. This study was carried out collectively by all three authors, under the leadership of the first author. Using a set of pre-established criteria regarding quality of sources and timeframe covered, we engaged in the systematic collection of key policy papers, expenditure reports and related press releases, academic and non-academic publications, official transport plans and related citizen submissions, reports of oral hearings and planning appeals, media coverage of transport developments and disputes as well as both published and informal interviews with key actors in the transport sector deemed relevant for this study.

To analyse the rich pool of data collected, we deployed systematic documentary analysis to identify key actors, institutions and discursive trends in the transport sector and trace the recent history of transport policy and governance in Ireland. The relative dearth of social-scientific publications that situate the history of transport governance, policy and practice in Ireland in their wider socio-political context necessitated a detailed socio-historical investigation beyond the scope originally intended by the authors. For example, it was frequently necessary to revisit efforts in the early to mid-twentieth century to modernise Ireland's transport system in order to understand more recent decisions and outcomes. Moreover, Ireland's increasing exposure to European and global economic and political processes that shaped its national transport system cannot be underestimated, although it was not possible to cover these international aspects exhaustively. Similarly, we were acutely aware of the complex interconnectedness between transport and other public and social policy arenas, including housing, land use and economic development, whose in-depth examination is beyond the scope of this paper. To complete the research process, we sent an initial draft of this paper to three Irish transport policy experts inviting their comments and additions. These were subsequently integrated into the paper.

3. From Hard Infrastructure to Soft Interventions: Milestones in Irish Transport Policy

While a detailed history of Irish transport policy is beyond the scope of this paper (see Appendix 1 for a timeline), a brief overview of major policy milestones offers interesting clues about the emergence and evolution of car-centric thinking, its impact on alternative transport

modes as well as broader questions regarding the prevailing socio-economic development model that underpinned these decisions.

Following independence and the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922, transport policy in Ireland continued to be influenced by UK policy trends (Collins & O'Shea, 2003; Coakley, 2005). The inherited transport legislation reflected the expansion and growing prominence of the railways in the nineteenth century. Strong pressure from the railway companies to regulate the market persisted, with the 1932 and 1933 Transport Acts restricting competition from independent bus companies and hauliers. These pieces of legislation created policy legacies that continue to shape transport policy today, with private bus operators encountering significant challenges when applying for route licences.

The establishment of Córas Iompair Éireann (CIÉ)[4] in 1945 and its transformation in 1950 into a statutory corporation responsible for public transport in Ireland consolidated the status quo, at least until the 1960s. Efforts by the Irish government to avoid direct subsidisation and reduce CIÉ losses included restricting competition in the public transport sector and closing down apparently uneconomic railway lines from the late 1950s onwards. However, the advent of the private car and subsequent growth in road-based transport meant these measures remained largely ineffective. As a result, the 1964 Transport Act introduced the possibility of direct annual subsidy to CIÉ, a payment which continues to-date. At the same time, "the pendulum of public policy swung against restriction of competition in the freight markets" (Barrett, 1982: 14-15), resulting in significant reductions in rail-based freight transport and the establishment of private haulier companies such as Nolan Transport in Wexford, now one of the largest hauliers in Europe.

Support for road-based transport remained relatively consistent until the late 2000s. As demand for road infrastructure rose, a dominant response was 'predict and provide', that is, to calculate future transport demand based on current figures and provide infrastructure and services to match that demand (Vigar, 2002: 43). Similarly, optimistic passenger projections also featured in public transport planning, such as in the case of the re-opening of sections of the Western Rail Corridor in 2010. Overall, many road and rail projects during the 'Celtic Tiger' era were justified on the grounds of ambitious growth predictions for population, traffic, and economic development. Interestingly, this approach was popularised following the publication of an influential UK government report entitled *Traffic in Towns* (Buchanan, 1963). While the Buchanan report recognised potential disadvantages of 'predict and provide', it was adopted more or less uncritically in both the UK and Ireland.

Vigar's (2002) sociological analysis of UK transport policy reveals a weakening of the 'predict and provide' paradigm in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the emergence of a 'new realism' in transport planning that advocates a 'predict and prevent' approach to demand management (cf. Goulden, Ryley, & Dingwell, 2014). Well-publicised challenges to the assumption that more roads lead to less congestion appear to have aided this paradigmatic shift (Goodwin, Hallet, Kenny, & Stokes, 1991; Goodwin, 1996). It remains debatable whether 'new realism' has become anyway embedded in institutions and practices (cf. Docherty & Shaw, 2011; Macmillen, 2013) but UK transport policy over the past two decades clearly has prioritised demand management.

In contrast, transport infrastructure provision based on a 'predict and provide' rationale retained its dominance in Ireland until the late 2000s, with initiatives to reduce demand, change

[4] The Córas Iompair Éireann (CIÉ) Group includes Bus Atha Cliath (Dublin Bus), Bus Éireann (Irish Bus), and Iarnrod Éireann (Irish Rail) and is the main provider of land public transport services within the Republic of Ireland providing rail and road freight services within the state. In addition to the Dublin Area Rapid Transit services (DART), the company also provides suburban services in the greater Dublin area. CIÉ is largely expected to operate as a private company, that is, to be profitable and to invest in its own infrastructure provision.

travel behaviour through 'soft' policy measures such as financial (dis)incentives and information campaigns and extend the capacity of existing infrastructure receiving limited attention. In the context of public transport, considerable investment in rail infrastructure, including the construction of its LUAS Light Rail System[5], and new rolling stock and bus fleets characterised the 'Celtic Tiger' period, thereby marginalising less costly improvements, maintenance, and greater (inter-modal) integration (cf. McDonald & Nix, 2005; Rau, 2012).[6] The early part of this century saw the most pertinent illustration of this trend in the Irish government's *Transport 21* investment programme, which sought to address the twin challenges of past investment backlogs and continuing growth in transport demand and which prioritised road construction and infrastructure-intensive public transport projects (Department of Transport, 2005a).

3.1. Progress in Motion? *Transport 21* – A Key Example of Transport Governance during the 'Celtic Tiger' (1995-2007)

Transport 21, a ten-year capital investment framework under the National Development Plan worth €34 billion, was launched in 2005 and was expected to run from 2006 until 2015 (Department of Transport, 2005a). However, growing economic difficulties led to its discontinuation in late 2010. The programme strongly emphasised both infrastructure provision and increased private investment and control over Ireland's road network through Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs). Perhaps more importantly, *Transport 21* was intended to meet five key aims; 1) increase accessibility for everybody, 2) ensure economic and environmental sustainability, 3) expand capacity to address existing deficiencies and provide for future growth, 4) increase use of public transport and, 5) enhance the quality of the transport system with regard to safety, accessibility, integration, reliability, speed, and comfort (Department of Transport, 2005b).[7] Projects financed under *Transport 21* included interurban motorways, new buses and train carriages, airport improvements and measures to increase accessibility. The initial allocation of funding under *Transport 21* provided an annual budget of €3.72bn for road construction and €1bn for public transport (Department of Transport, 2005b). This compares to 2014 estimates of €548m for road improvement and maintenance, €285m for public transport investment and €11m for *Smarter Travel* and other carbon reduction measures (Department of Public Expenditure, 2013: 189). The monies set aside for *Smarter Travel* equates to merely 2% of funds set aside for road improvements and maintenance in that year.

Interestingly, *Transport 21* did not feature its own land use planning and transport policy framework to underpin its ambitious spending programme but was expected to follow existing policies, most notably the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) 2002-2020 (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 2002). This Strategy set out a planning framework aimed at achieving a better balance of social, economic, and physical development by connecting areas of sufficient scale and critical mass through a network of gateways and hubs. However, implementation of the NSS remains incomplete. A review in 2010 recognised that "excessive and inappropriately located zonings and development have worked against consistent implementation of National Spatial Strategy principles and priorities and undermined efficient exchequer investment in infrastructure and services" (Department of the Environment Heritage and Local Government, 2010: 5). For example, geographically dispersed residential and

[5] LUAS represented the first new light rail infrastructure project since the closure of the last of the Dublin tramways in 1949.

[6] For example, proposals in the mid-2000s to widen existing national roads and to adopt a 2+1 model whereby an alternating third lane is added to allow for safe overtaking was quickly abandoned in favour of a fully-fledged motorway construction programme (Deas & Nix, 2011).

[7] A question not adequately dealt with during the lifetime of the programme was whether these aims are mutually compatible. Concerns over possible tensions between economic and environmental sustainability goals, potential incompatibilities between the goal of universal accessibility and the desire for greater integration and time savings, and rising oil prices and the potential impact on traffic demand were repeatedly raised by sustainable transport campaigners and environmental and civil society groups but never really entered the policy debate (cf. Deas & Nix, 2011: for a detailed analysis).

commercial property development across the country led to greater distances between where people live and work, thereby compounding problems with inter-modal integration[8] and appropriate transport infrastructure project specifications regarding size, location, and route selection. Similarly, the prioritisation of inter-urban motorways and the concentration of public transport projects in Ireland's capital city Dublin did little to address rural-urban imbalances.

While *Transport 21* brought about important tangible benefits with regard to accessibility, quality of services, and travel times, it is much more difficult to accurately assess its long-term legacy for society and the environment. During the 2000s transport-related greenhouse gas emissions increased more rapidly than those in other sectors of the Irish economy (Sustainable Energy Ireland, 2009). They remain unsustainably high at almost 20% of Ireland's total emissions (Environmental Protection Agency, 2011) and this trend is predicted to continue, with a recent EPA Ireland report stating:

> The projections show that Ireland is not on a pathway to a low-carbon economy. […] emissions are projected to increase between 2020 and 2030 (12% in total) with *transport a key contributor to this trend* in the absence of additional policies and measures (Environmental Protection Agency, 2014: 3, emphasis added by authors).

Social sustainability issues arising from car dependence include the risk of mobility-related fuel poverty among low and medium-income households and greater exposure to fuel price volatility. Furthermore, while road and rail infrastructure construction produced tangible economic benefits, its long-term costs cannot be ignored. For example, the proportion of government spending on maintaining and repairing existing roads as part of the overall budget for road improvement and maintenance continues to rise. A statement in 2013 by then Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Leo Varadkar, illustrates this:

> We still have to deliver a reduction in the roads budget. This means the focus will be on maintenance and repair, not new projects other than those already planned (Varadkar, 2014).

The 'Celtic Tiger' period represented a major step forward in terms of moving Ireland from a conservative, rural and agrarian economy to a more modern European state outperforming many other industrialised nations (cf. Dorgan, 2006). The creation of a modern transport system in the form of a more integrated inter-urban motorway network, new light rail infrastructure (LUAS), and the upgrading of the railways and bus fleet reflected Ireland's new status and confidence. In this context "Transport 21 [was] a recognition of the changing Ireland" (Cullen, 2005). However, the deep and sudden collapse of the Irish economy in the context of the global crisis of 2008 raised serious questions about the suitability and robustness of the development model that underpinned these modernisation efforts (Kirby, 2010). Internal weaknesses in the country's institutional, cultural and political structure and exposure to external (financial) power and associated risks have been identified as key defects (Kirby, 2010; O'Toole, 2010). Environmental lobby groups have frequently directed their criticism towards internal issues such as mismanagement of public funding and weaknesses in the Irish system of governance:

> Ireland's international reputation and credibility for responsible governance has taken a severe blow as a consequence of the economic crisis and underlying mismanagement at multiple levels which contributed to it; and which included individuals, institutions, regulatory bodies and governments (Environmental Pillar of Social Partnership Ireland, 2012: 17).

[8] The construction of high-specification motorways alongside key inter-urban train routes (e.g. Galway-Dublin) put railway services under severe pressure to compete directly with the car and bus, a contest that Irish Rail is unlikely to win without significant state subvention.

Transport 21 represented a key example of a cost- and carbon-intensive transport infrastructure development programme which depended upon favourable economic conditions and which prioritised supply-side measures over efforts to manage mobility demand and encourage the use of more sustainable transport modes. Interestingly, the implementation of *Transport 21* until 2010 coincided with a shift in EU transport policy that recognised the growing economic and ecological unsustainability of the European transport system (Humphreys, 2011). The 2011 White Paper *Roadmap to a Single European Transport Area – Towards a competitive and resource efficient transport system* outlined the need for optimised transport systems across the union to meet the demands of enlargement and sustainable development (European Commission, 2011). While it states emphatically that "curbing mobility is not an option" (European Commission, 2011: 5) and transport growth and economic progress are inseparable, it nevertheless calls for a reduction in transport-related emissions by 60% through 'smarter', more efficient travel and the promotion of less oil-dependent alternatives to the car.[9] In Ireland, this emerging discourse was reflected in *Smarter Travel: A Sustainable Transport Future*, a policy initiative launched in 2009 (Department of Transport, 2009).

3.2. *Smarter Travel*: A New Departure?

In the late 2000s growing concerns over the 'locking in' of car dependence triggered calls for sustainable transport alternatives. This coincided with rapidly dwindling public finances, the cessation of *Transport 21* in 2010 and a shift towards low-cost and no-cost transport initiatives. In 2009 the Minister for Transport Noel Dempsey launched *Smarter Travel: A Sustainable Transport Future* (Department of Transport, 2009), intended to cover the period 2009-2020. Following extensive public consultation, *Smarter Travel* provided a new policy framework for promoting low-carbon alternatives to the car such as walking, cycling, and public transport use. It furthermore advocates changes in land use patterns to address growing rural-urban imbalances in transport infrastructure provision and accessibility. In addition, the document calls for the co-location of employment and residential centres and an alignment of employment policy with transport planning. While the role of continued investment in transport to ensure sustained economic and social development is recognised throughout the document, it also sets out steps to encourage the use of more sustainable transport modes, including fiscal incentives. Here, *Smarter Travel* provides a catalogue of predominantly low-cost solutions based primarily on light-touch regulation, local initiatives, and 'soft' measures to encourage behavioural change.

The launch of *Smarter Travel* was followed by the Public Transport Regulation Act in November 2009 which provided a legislative base for the complete overhaul of the bus sector, with a view to enhancing road-based public transport and creating a 'level playing pitch' for both public and private bus operators. This new bill saw responsibility for the administration and issuance of bus licences transferred from the Department of Transport to the Dublin Transport Authority, later to become the National Transport Authority (NTA), initiating the (partial) privatisation of public transport. The primary focus of the bill was "to place the bus passenger at the centre of a new, transformed national bus licensing regime and to replace the current outmoded and inadequate regime that has applied to the authorisation of bus routes for some 77 years" (Dempsey, 2009). Even though there are no explicit references to the privatisation of public transport in *Smarter Travel,* the 2009 Public Transport Regulation Act clearly endorsed the practice.[10]

Smarter Travel, for the first time, acknowledged the need for extensive public consultation to achieve a more sustainable transport system. In fact, the drafting of *Smarter Travel* itself

[9] Humphreys (2011) offers a critical analysis of intractable tensions in European transport policy arising from a continued endorsement of unfettered economic growth and freedom of movement of people and goods, and parallel commitments to socially and environmentally sustainable development.

[10] The current majority governmental party Fine Gael's 2011 election manifesto strongly promotes privatisation. "We will completely overhaul the bus market in Ireland by introducing competitive tendering for all bus routes in the country as soon as practicably possible" (Fine Gael, 2011: 78).

involved hitherto unseen levels of public engagement. In the introduction to the document Minister Dempsey acknowledges:

> This document is the result of what was one of the most extensive and informed engagements that I have ever experienced as a Minister. Almost 500 individuals and groups responded to our consultation process [...]. Almost all agreed that 'business as usual' is not an option. [...] it can truly be said that this is the people's policy 'to change our unsustainable habits in the travel and transport area' (Department of Transport, 2009: 7).

While contributions from 500 citizens and groups, most of which showed a high level of awareness of transport issues, are not representative of the population as a whole, this consultation process signalled a departure from previous top-down policy processes that frequently excluded those who are most affected by policy and those who are expected to implement it. Did the transition from *Transport 21* to *Smarter Travel* coincide with a change in institutional structures underpinning transport policy-making, marking a departure from top-down government to multi-actor governance?

4. Who decides? Mapping the Broadening Field of Transport Policy in Ireland

Transport 21, with its emphasis on transport infrastructure development, was reflective of two key trends in transport governance. Firstly, it revealed the dual role of the EU as the source of policy impulses within individual member states and as provider of funding.[11] The EU recently renewed its commitment to greater integration of the European transport system through the establishment of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), and associated loan guarantee instruments (LGTT) (European Commission, 2011). As a result, responsibility for transport policy is now spread across different levels of decision-making ranging from the local to the supranational. While this has increased integration in areas such as road safety and traffic law enforcement, tensions continue to exist between local, national, and supra-national interests in areas such as motor taxation and infrastructure development. Ireland's EU (then EEC) membership in 1973 significantly increased the 'Europeanisation' of key areas of national transport policy such as infrastructure construction and service provision (O'Donnell, 2000; Harvey, 2008).

Secondly, *Transport 21* signalled a shift towards multi-level governance, with certain interest groups achieving considerable influence due to the diversification of the transport policy-making landscape.[12] This development built upon the prior establishment of social partnership in 1987 which saw main employer groups, such as IBEC[13] and the Construction Industry Federation, and trade unions increase their influence on policy decision-making (cf. Baccaro & Simoni, 2004: 4). One of social partnership's core functions was the negotiation of consensual agreements between state, employers, and unions regarding wages and working conditions, including job security and working hours.[14] Social partnership, therefore, directly influenced the country's tax base, creating the conditions for state-led investment in large-scale infrastructure projects such as the motorway programme in the mid-2000s (Baccaro & Simoni, 2004). The inclusion into social partnership of the community and voluntary sector (CVS), or 'social pillar',

[11] Historically, transport in Europe had been the responsibility of individual states, with little evidence of cross-national collaboration. However, the Treaty of Rome in 1958, which led to the establishment of the European Economic Community, included a commitment to developing cross-border European transport networks (Whitelegg, 1997; Ross, 1998).

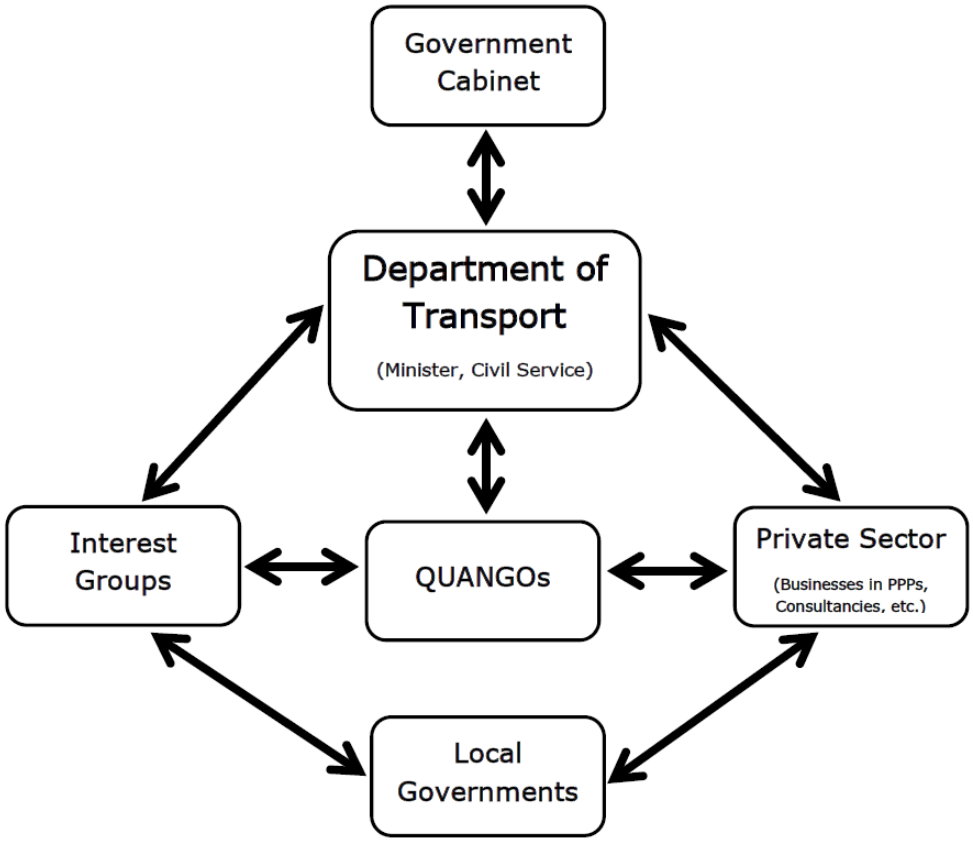
[12] For example, the pro-car lobby and the construction sector managed to substantially influence the *Transport 21* agenda, in particular the motorway programme. Here, the Automobile Association (AA) of Ireland's ability to shape government decisions in the interests of motorists deserves recognition.

[13] The Irish Business and Employers' Confederation (IBEC) is Ireland's largest business and employers lobbying organisation representing the interests of over 7500 organisations, regions, and industry sectors.

[14] Here it is important to note that partnership focused mainly (albeit not exclusively) on the public sector, including CIÉ with its responsibility for public transport. The private sector remained much less affected by these negotiations, with those working for private bus operators and hauliers facing much greater exposure to 'wage dumping' and the increasing 'flexibilisation' of contracts and working hours.

in 1996 and of the 'environmental pillar', a group of 26 environmental NGOs, in 2009 further diversified the police-making community in Ireland but the ability of these latter groups to influence government policy remained weak.[15] The significance of social partnership was greatly diminished following the financial crisis in 2008.

Despite recent moves towards greater participation by non-traditional policy actors, transport policy-making in Ireland still remains chiefly in the hands of central government which retains the exclusive right to initiate legislation (McDonald & Nix, 2005). Officially, policy is the government's responsibility but practically it is handled by respective Ministers who submit proposals for cabinet approval. Local authorities, on the other hand, have neither a mandate to shape transport policy nor sufficient funding to undertake any significant change. Their prime responsibility is improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads. This reflects the relative powerlessness of local government in Ireland more generally, which has been described as one of the weakest specimens in Europe (Flynn, 2007; Ó'Broin & Waters, 2007; Quinlivan & Schoen-Quinlivan, 2009). They also lack legal and fiscal autonomy, depending on central government to disburse almost half their funding (Flynn, 2007: 127).[16] According to the (OECD, 2008: 68), "Ireland has limited local autonomy which, in turn, strengthens the input-focus of national policies". One of the consequences of weak local government is the unusually close relationship between national parliamentarians (Teachta Dála or TDs) and their constituents. For example, citizens frequently approach their TDs (rather than local councillors) about local transport issues such as basic road maintenance or changes in traffic layout.

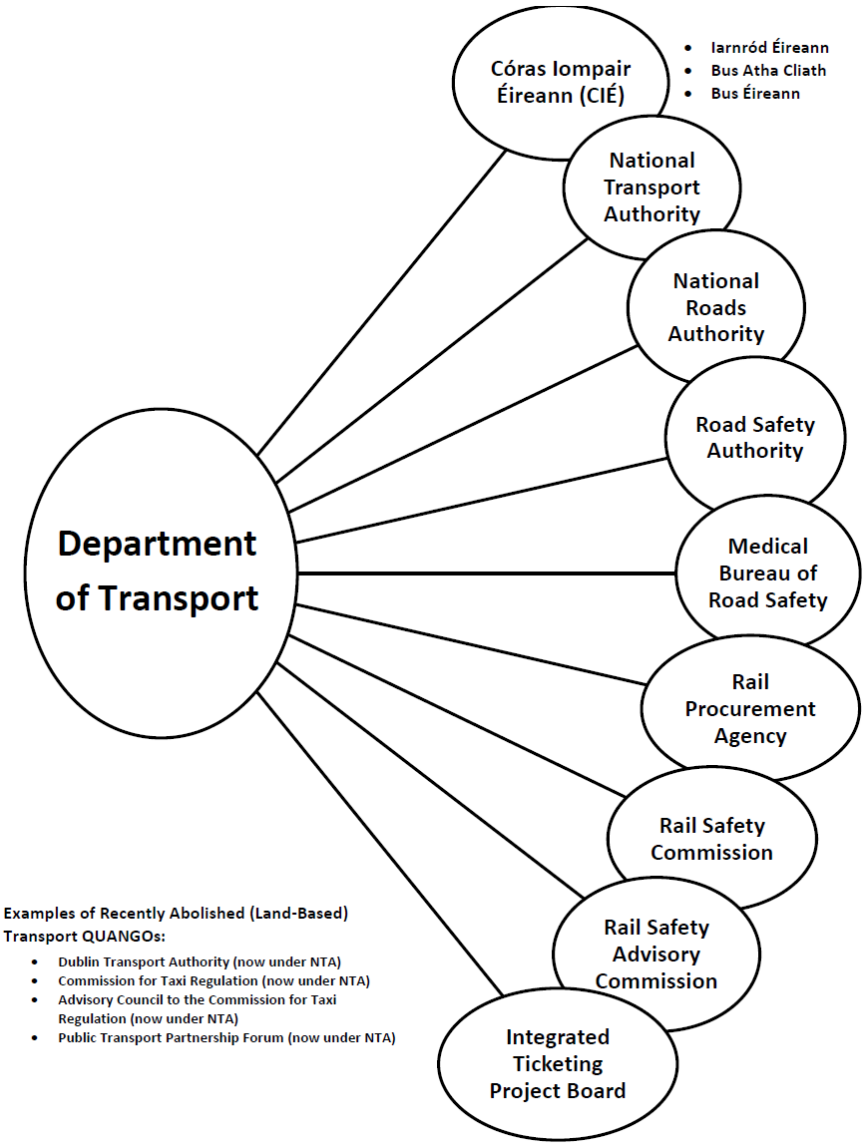


[insert figure 1 here] - Key Actors in Transport Policy-making

[15] See Rau & Hennessy (2009) for an analysis of the role of the CVS in the establishment and implementation of the Rural Transport Programme, for example.
[16] In 2007 Ó'Broin and Waters revealed that only 6% of public spending occurs at local level. This lack of local fiscal autonomy is likely to have been further exacerbated by the recession.

In addition to elected officials, a number of other actors exert considerable influence on policy design in Ireland (see Figure 1). These include the civil service, agencies, semi-state bodies, and interest and lobby groups. High ranking civil servants shape policy through their understanding of transport issues and act as a point of access for external interests. Ministers are 'birds of passage' (O'Halpin, 1992: 168) who occupy their position of power for relatively short periods and who rely heavily on the proficiency and knowledge of senior civil servants and special advisors. Consequently, civil servants influence policy not only by handling and implementing it but also in its formation (O'Halpin, 1992). In addition to shaping policy, civil servants present an authoritative point of access to decision-making. They have established networks of contacts with various interest groups and individuals, channels of communication which are difficult to determine and quantify. Nevertheless, informal processes are likely to skew participation in policy formulation towards particular interests.

The implementation of transportation policy and strategy in Ireland is also influenced by a significant number of Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisations (QUANGOs) (see Figure 2 below for the list of QUNANGOs that influence transport policy design).



List of QUANGOs Responsible for Land-based Transportation

The organisations involved in land-based transportation can be divided in non-commercial and commercial state-sponsored bodies, the former include the National Roads Authority (NRA) and the National Transport Authority (NTA).[17] The NRA is particularly powerful and relevant in the development and implementation of road policy. In contrast, the NTA's core responsibilities revolve around bus and taxi licensing as well as transport research and planning, most notably in relation to the Greater Dublin Area. Importantly, the establishment of the NTA was intended to mitigate the worst effects of policy fragmentation brought about by the proliferation during the 1990s and early 2000s of quasi-autonomous government agencies responsible for various aspects of transport planning (cf. Ó'Broin & Waters, 2007).

The commercial bodies encompass the Railway Procurement Agency (RPA)[18] and the aforementioned CIÉ Group. These QUANGOs are largely controlled by government-appointed individuals with special interest or expertise in relevant areas, although their appointment is often speculated to be payback for political patronage (Collins & Quinlivan, 2010). The involvement of these commercial bodies in policy formulation raises concerns around transparency and accountability (Clancy & Murphy, 2006). While these appointed directors are not directly responsible for daily management operations and decision-making, they are frequently involved in the development of long-term strategy and help shape the culture of these organisations. In addition to close connections with Ministers and senior civil servants, directors of commercial QUANGOs can influence large infrastructural projects promoted by the government (Collins & Quinlivan, 2010: 369). Through these boards of directors, specific interest groups can exert influence on transport policy, albeit in a round-about manner. Overall, some key QUANGOs exert considerable influence over transport policy implementation in Ireland. Although it has been argued that government devolving power to semi-state bodies to this extent is specific to 'slim states' like Ireland and the UK, similar trends can also be observed in other parts of Europe, albeit to a lesser degree.[19]

The question of whether QUANGOs either positively or negatively influence a shift towards sustainable transport is very pertinent. There is evidence that certain prominent QUANGOs and agencies tasked with environmental and sustainability issues such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) have strongly advocated for sustainable transport action, albeit with varying degrees of success. For example, over the past two decades and since its inception the EPA has repeatedly called for measures to curb carbon emissions from the transport sector (EPA 2011, 2014). However, many transport QUANGOs have tended to exclusively concentrate on their own organisational agendas (e.g. improving road safety, planning and implementing road infrastructure development) and not to holistically consider transport and its impact on society and the environment.

Recently, private sector interests have exerted a growing influence on Irish transport policy. For example, Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) have provided the private sector with a new sphere of influence on national transport policy. Since the early 1990s the Irish state, traditionally the provider of transport infrastructure, has accepted private investment for the construction of large-scale transport infrastructure such as motorways. Through these schemes the private sector and national policy makers have established close links that have become partly institutionalised, although this is not always clearly visible. In addition, the prestige of

[17] The National Transport Authority (Údarás Náisiúnta Iompair) was established in 2009 and replaced the Dublin Transport Office (DTO). The Authority is responsible for the procurement of public land transport services nationally. It also has responsibility for strategic transport planning and the provision of an integrated transport system in the Greater Dublin Area.

[18] The Railway Procurement Agency (RPA) is responsible for the procurement of new light rail and metro infrastructure projects through a number of means including Public Private Partnerships (PPPs). There are currently plans to merge the National Roads Authority and the Railway Procurement Agency into a new Transport Infrastructure Service (TIS).

[19] The increasingly powerful role of semi-state body *Deutsche Bahn* in Germany's public transport sector exemplifies this.

infrastructural projects, especially their perceived role as potential 'vote getters', further strengthen the private sectors' position and influence on policy formulation. As a result, there has been a tendency to customise policies to support PPPs, partly enhanced by a trend in Europe towards growing private sector involvement in the area of transport. Consequently, transport policy-making can be heavily influenced by profitability goals, while largely ignoring social and environmental impacts.

Sustainable transport advocates have emerged as a new set of actors seeking to influence transport policy and practice. For example, the promotion of cycling by local authorities and national government, including the construction of greenways for walking and cycling, can be partly attributed to persistent lobbying by non-governmental actors such as local Cycling Campaigns, which have effectively utilised online media and good practice examples[20] to promote sustainable transport policy and practice. The effectiveness, or otherwise, of such lobbying groups relates closely to their ability to operate outside the realm of conventional politics but, at the same time, influence policy decisions. This new wave of sustainability lobbying starkly contrasts with the highly adversarial relationship between the state and environmental non-governmental organisations during the 'Celtic Tiger' era, which left few opportunities for ENGOs to influence policy and which led to some protracted disputes and confrontations over transport infrastructure construction in Ireland (Bowcott, 2006; Flynn, 2007).[21] However, sustainable transport advocates' ability to influence policy still remains limited to certain areas. For example, there have been very few serious attempts to curb car use through (dis)incentives coupled with the provision of alternatives, steps advocated by those who favour sustainable transport. Similarly, road infrastructure provision and, increasingly, maintenance continue to receive the lion's share of public funding for transport measures, despite arguments by sustainable transport campaigners to shift the focus of public spending towards alternatives such as walking, cycling and public transport (An Taisce, 2014b: 10).

A further consideration relates to the role played by An Bord Pleanála[22] in recent transport policy implementation. As the main enforcer of land use and transport programmes in Ireland, it is claimed that the An Bord Pleanála is not upholding *Smarter Travel* and is ignoring sensible transport policy decisions. One of the strongest proponents of this position is Ireland's planning watchdog *An Taisce*, the independent charity that works to preserve and protect Ireland's natural and built heritage. They suggest that "An Bord Pleanála […] is ignoring climate science and Government transport policy in its decision-making on key planning applications" and that recent decisions by the board are "completely incompatible with the Government's *Smarter Travel* policy" (An Taisce, 2014a).

Transport policy-making in Ireland continuous to be opaque, featuring a multitude of actors whose power and influence varies considerably. Moreover, entrenched top-down and car-centric decision-making contrasts with a rapidly expanding array of multi-actor governance processes, particularly in the area of sustainable transport. Given that *Smarter Travel* remains firmly embedded in traditional institutional structures and powerful pro-car networks of policy actors that remain closed to promoters of sustainable transport, it seems unlikely that it can

[20] The Scotland-wide initiative *Smarter Choices, Smarter Places: Creating Greener Travel* (The Scottish Government, 2008) which was organised by the Scottish Government in partnership with COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities), local authorities and regional transport partnerships and which appears to have given important impulses to the *Smarter Travel* programme in Ireland.

[21] Some large road construction projects such as the M3 motorway through the Hill of Tara complex were mired in controversy and delays, partly because decisions to press ahead with these projects were often made without any meaningful public consultation. Those opposed to a project frequently had no other outlet for their views than the public hearings organised by the planning appeals board, An Bord Pleanála (cf. Rau, 2008).

[22] An Bord Pleanála is the statutory, quasi-judicial body that decides on appeals from planning decisions made by local authorities in Ireland. As of 2007, An Bord Pleanála directly decides major strategic infrastructural projects under the provisions of the Planning and Development (Strategic Infrastructure) Act 2006. The board also hears applications from local authorities for projects which would have a significant environmental impact.

actually deliver more sustainable outcomes. Although the emergence of sustainable transport advocates seeking to shape transport decision-making has become more apparent, there is little evidence of any substantial influence in transport policy design stemming from this sector. Indeed, the dogma of 'predict and provide' infrastructure construction continues to dominate at the expense of sustainable transport alternatives and environmental responsiveness.[23] Despite this however, there have been some movement towards sustainable transport alternatives and in the next section we will explore how and why this has occurred. Can it be viewed as a paradigm shift in Irish transport policy design or is it just a quick fix solution in times of financial restraint?

5. Discussion: Paradigm Shift or Business as Usual?

Does *Smarter Travel* signal a transition towards a more environmentally sustainable, low-carbon transport system that endorses a 'predict and prevent' approach to demand management? Recent *Smarter Travel* activities intended to reduce transport-related emissions have revolved around; 1) the implementation of low-cost projects at local level, such as greenways and measures for improving traffic flow in urban areas and, 2) the maintenance of existing infrastructure, a task which has been made more urgent and difficult by high-spec 'Celtic Tiger' infrastructure, most notably the extensive motorway network. There is evidence that *Smarter Travel* and related measures, including the introduction of an emissions-based system of car taxation in 2009, have helped reduce transport-related greenhouse gases. However, a sharp reduction in the movement of people and goods associated with the recession is more likely to have been the main contributing factor. In addition, it is worth noting that the transport sector in Ireland remains one of the top three greenhouse gas emitters, alongside agriculture and energy production (Environmental Protection Agency, 2011), a trend that is mirrored globally. A reduction in overall transport emissions would serve as a key indicator of a move towards sustainability. In addition, a decrease in the distance travelled and an increase in modal share for walking, cycling and public transport would also act as indicators of a shift towards transport sustainability. In Ireland, however, there has been a steady increase in transport emissions since the recession (Environmental Protection Agency, 2014), in the average distance travelled, and little reduction in the use of the private car for journeys (Central Statistics Office, 2014).

But is there any evidence of a fundamental change in transport policy thinking and practice? *Smarter Travel* may just be a *temporary* cost-cutting measure that will be replaced by 'business-as-usual' car-centric decision-making as soon as Ireland's economic performance improves. Rather than being replaced by a deep cultural shift towards sustainability, 'predict and provide' thinking may only be temporarily suspended until new infrastructural funding becomes available, a fact that is reflected in many decision-makers' continued reluctance to even minimally curb car use. An announcement by the Irish Government in July 2012 of a €2bn 'off-balance-sheet' stimulus package to support 'job-rich' and 'shovel-ready' infrastructure construction projects such as the N17/N18 Gort to Tuam road scheme seems to confirm this (Minihan, 2012). The broad orientation of transport policy in Ireland remains relatively unchanged since 2009. The arrival of the 'troika'[24] in 2010 and the subsequent roll-out of fiscal austerity measures as well as a change in government in 2011 that was expected to bring a radical departure from previous policy thinking and practice had little impact on broad transport policy direction. Perhaps *Smarter Travel* pre-empted a significant downscaling of

[23] The proposed N6 Galway City Outer Bypass is a good case in point. An Bord Pleanála approved planning permission for a 12 kilometre road in 2008. Part of the road was planned to cross a designated 'site of community importance' at Lough Corrib, which hosts 14 different habitats protected under the EU habitats directive. In 2013 the European Court of Justice ruled that planning permission cannot be granted for the project stating that it will" adversely affect the integrity of that site" as a protected priority natural habitat. Nevertheless, local, regional, and national interests continue to press for the roads construction with alternative routes seeking to demolish up to 130 homes along the roads path also being proposed (Bradley, 2015).

[24] The 'troika' was a crisis management committee consisting of the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund following Ireland's financial crash.

investment in transport infrastructure, which the Fine Gael-Labour coalition government that was elected in 2011 was unable or unwilling to reverse. Equally optimist policy transformation was suggested in Britain under 'New Labour' (Goodwin, 1999), but after thirteen years in power neither policy nor longstanding transport trends were successfully transformed (Docherty & Shaw, 2011).

Transport-related institutional responses to the recession deserve closer scrutiny here, partly because of their rather unexpected focus on sustainability. The government's reaction to falling revenue was, by and large, to concentrate on 'smarter' options such as investments in cycling infrastructure, road-based public transport and place greater emphasis on promoting walking and cycling. While the rationale for this is likely to be multi-facetted, perceptions of (and responses to) changes in the economic landscape *among those in charge of transport policy* are likely to form a sizable part of the picture, ruling out narrowly economistic and apolitical readings of this transition towards greater sustainability in the transport sector. In any case, what is clear is that the government's response and change of direction took place *within* the established policy-making and existing institutional framework. No significant institutional transition was required to produce transport solutions which were radically different to 'big spend' projects under *Transport 21*. This seems to call into question claims that a radical re-structuring of institutions is an essential pre-requisite for sustainability-proofing (transport) policy. Perhaps it is possible after all to 'green' existing structures and institutions without radically transforming them, a view that dominates the realm of environmental policy in Europe.

However, the apparent lack of radical reform in how transport is governed could also be interpreted as a sign of a car-centric 'business-as-usual' approach which has only temporarily disappeared under a thin veil of 'smarter transport' rhetoric. Sceptical voices who critique the oftentimes patchy implementation of *Smarter Travel* and the chronic lack of funding for alternatives to the car point in this direction. Nevertheless, the Irish perspective would indicate that there are significant opportunities for sustainability initiatives and change to take hold in times of financial prudence and these do not require radical institutional transformation. The Irish case would further suggest transport policy openness for such sustainability innovativeness during such periods providing opportunities to significantly influence short-term and long-term decision-making in relation of sustainable transport, with the additional potential for such change in policy and attitudes to become more deeply embedded.

To make progress towards balancing economic, social and ecological goals, sustainable transport needs to play a key role. This raises the question whether the growing significance of sustainable transport policy and governance in Ireland, the EU and elsewhere will last beyond the current economic crisis. Given the 'smarter' travel agenda appears to be largely a politically motivated response to changing economic conditions rather than being indicative of a commitment among key transport policy actors to creating a new sustainable mobility culture, talk of the end of car-centric thinking and practice and 'predict and provide' approaches to infrastructure planning may be premature. For example, a reluctance to subsidise public transport, a strong focus on privatisation, and a lack of effective regulation with regard to transport infrastructure provision continue to influence transport policy and governance in Ireland. It remains to be seen whether changes initiated as part of the *Smarter Travel* agenda in the late 2000s such as a greater emphasis on promoting low-cost, non-motorised transport such as walking and cycling are more institutionally embedded, thereby making them more resilient to changes in the political landscape. The establishment by the Fianna Fáil/PD/Green Party government (2007-2011) of a junior ministry for sustainable transport was an indication of a notable reformed institutional setup. However, in the following Fine Gael/Labour government, the junior ministry was changed to 'public and commuter transport' and was abolished in 2014.[25] Efforts by the current government to re-assign responsibilities for transport policy

[25] At that time, a new junior ministry for 'rural economic development and rural transport' was established.

implementation to a reduced number of governmental and quasi-governmental actors aims to reverse government efforts since the mid-1990s to devolve responsibility for this policy area, at least to some degree. Existing networks of pro-car actors both within and outside the traditional realm of transport policy, most notably the construction sector, may or may not now seek to re-establish themselves as powerful players in post-recession transport policy-making.

Moreover, 'smarter', more sustainable transport policy measures to date have tended to concentrate on soft measures, primarily the provision of information regarding walking, cycling, public transport, car sharing, or teleworking. Much of these are low- or no-cost non-infrastructural interventions seeking to provide the impetus for modal shift away from car usage and dependency. There is little evidence of a serious move to incorporate land use and planning into sustainable transport policy thinking and departmental silo thinking continues to permeate much of the decision-making in this regards. Some major cycling infrastructural projects, such as scenic greenways in rural areas, have been completed and others are under consideration but these tend to be focussed on increasing tourist figures and are not ordinarily directed at alleviating the pressure on transport networks in urban centres.

What can be learnt from the Irish case study that may help to advance sustainable transport in Ireland and internationally? What is evident is that a 'window of opportunity' to progress sustainability efforts opened during the economic downturn in Ireland and allowed transport policy emphasis to shift from high-cost infrastructure development to low- or no-cost sustainable transport options such as walking and cycling. Only time will tell if current commitments to sustainable transport alternatives are genuine, or if such moves are merely a way of adapting to unfavourable economic circumstances only to return to an unsustainable, car-centric system when finances improve. There are certainly plenty of reasons to be optimistic, not least because a cultural change is palpable. The success of the Dublin bike scheme, the roll-out of similar schemes in Cork, Limerick and Galway, the growing popularity of, and investment in, greenways and recent improvements in road-based public transport all point towards a shift in how people view transport and mobility. This resembles developments in many other parts of Europe where low-carbon alternatives to the car are increasingly popular, with good practice examples from Denmark or the UK regularly entering the public debate in Ireland. While economic pressures may be partly responsible for this shift in thinking, there are clearly other factors at play also. Transport policy that emerges in response to unprecedented economic, social, and political turbulences may thus initiate a longer-term transition towards more sustainable transport.

6. Conclusions

The social-scientific analysis of national-level transport policy and practice presented herein demonstrates the need for greater alignment between public debates and policy development both within and beyond the transport sector. Moreover, the findings call for fresh thinking regarding public investment and divestment that incorporates insights from social-scientific and interdisciplinary transport research and that prioritises sustainable transport over and above individual motorised transport. As demonstrated throughout the paper, short-term reactions to an economic crisis, especially cost-cutting measures and an over-emphasis on low-cost and no-cost transport solutions, are unlikely to produce a fully functioning, future-proof sustainable transport system. Instead, what is needed is a combination of wide-ranging, cross-sectoral policy changes and re-allocation of transport funding. Recent changes in EU transport policy and practice towards multi-annual transport budgets, closer links between transport and land use policy, investment in public transport, especially rail, and a greater emphasis on changing transport-related norms and mobility practices have opened up promising pathways that could benefit highly car-dependent EU member-states such as Ireland. Moreover, revelations in September 2015 regarding the manipulation of car emissions levels by large car manufacturers point to the crucial role of trustworthy state and non-state institutions that are

fully committed to sustainable transport. Here, the future significance of sustainable transport NGOs and advocacy groups should not be underestimated.

Acknowledgements

This paper draws on research conducted for CONSENSUS (www.consensus.ie), a large-scale social science research project on sustainable consumption funded by the EPA Ireland (2008-SD-LS-1-S1). We would especially like to thank our CONSENSUS colleagues for their feedback on our work on transport, mobility and the 'consumption of distance'.

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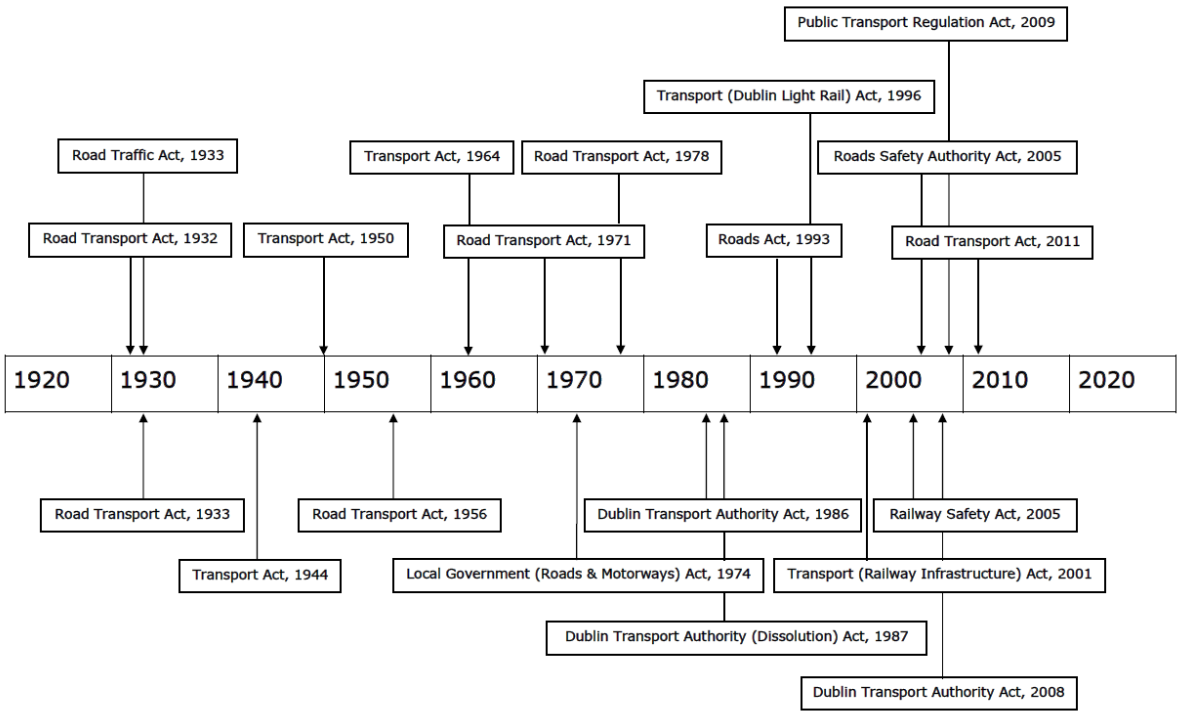
Appendix



Some Key Milestones in the Development of Irish Transport Policy