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Unlocking institutional imagination: Introduction to conference proceedings

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Introduction

The next three journal articles emerged from the proceedings of a conference on 'Transformative Change: Unlocking Institutional Imagination' that took place at Maynooth University on 4 April 2024. The conference progressed through an informal grouping, the Futures Forum, that developed as a loose network after a successful Futures Thinking conference held at Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin (UCD) in November 2022. That conference focused on the need for and role of foresight and futures capabilities to address longer-term issues in Irish and European economies and societies. This was followed by a number of themed events, including

a half-day workshop on Literary Futures at the University of Galway and two presentations in UCD by John Barry (Queen's University Belfast) and Isabelle Stengers (Université Libre de Bruxelles).

Conversations at and after these events prompted a small organising group – Donncha Kavanagh (UCD) Mary Murphy (Maynooth University (MU)), Ian Hughes (University College Cork (UCC)) and Dermot O'Doherty (Futures Forum) – to imagine this conference as a way of engaging with academics, public servants, and civil society. We were not advocating any particular agenda of institutional change in the conference; rather we wanted to create space for active conversation among people working for transformative change. We saw the conference as an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the transformative state that many of us believe is necessary, including new forms of democracy.

History shows that states are capable of radical transformation and creative innovation. For instance, in the 1920s and 1930s, Ireland pioneered the concept of the semi-state (or state-sponsored) organisation, subsequently creating a range of institutions that were central to the country's economic development. Internationally, we can point to many examples of positive radical imaginaries from Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, to the United Kingdom's welfare state, to the United States' Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act 2021. Another illustration of what a sustainable and transformative state can accomplish is the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation – a semi-state organisation created in 1995 by the Government of India and the Government of Delhi – which has, since 1998, built a metro network that is now over 350 kilometres in length. In *The Entrepreneurial State* (2011), Mariana Mazzucato confronted the lazy prejudice that states cannot innovate with a slew of empirical evidence; for instance, the United States Government played a critical role in developing the twelve major technologies – from multi-touch screens to lithium-iron batteries – that underpin Apple's iPhone and iPad. Likewise, the Internet and the World Wide Web both came out of public organisations, the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency and the European Organization for Nuclear Research, respectively (Mulgan, 2014). It is important to recognise the state's accomplishments not least to counter the pernicious concept of a 'night-watchman' state, where the state's role is limited to protecting citizens from aggression, theft, breach of contract, fraud, and enforcing property laws.

Aware of the need for transformative change, our desire was to provide space for rethinking the role of institutions in enabling deeper,

more systemic, and speedier transformation. We wanted to offer an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the transformative state and its institutions, new forms of democracy, and international experience in re-imagining institutions. We also wanted to enable ourselves and others to get unstuck, to shake off institutional inertia and to share experiences of transformative change.

The conference brought together policy-makers, non-governmental organisations, academics, legislators, public representatives, and journalists. Not all of us agreed with each other about what institutional change was needed, but all of us were united that transformative change is needed, and at a scale that challenges us all to understand how this can be done.

We begin this paper with a brief review of what we mean by institutions and institutional reform. There were many table conversations at the conference, these were generated through table-top dialogues facilitated by the Burren Art College. While we cannot feed back the creative content of these table and cross-plenary discussions, we include a very 'broad brush' summary – delineating between 'hard' and 'soft', or structures and functions versus ways of working. We then reflect on broad contributions made to the plenary discussion by two of the conference organisers, Donncha Kavanagh and Dermot O'Doherty. These further unpack the concept of institutional reform and reflect on the role of the Futures Forum in networking people to focus on what needs to be done to advance a sustainable future. The three articles that follow this introductory piece are then outlined. We conclude by setting out a potential way to progress these themes through the Futures Forum and other spaces. We invite interested parties to join in such endeavours.

Institutional reform

Institutions are 'the formal and informal rules, norms, precedents, and organisational factors that structure behaviour' (Pomey et al., 2010). As humanly devised constraints and enablers, they structure our political, economic, and social interactions (Folbre, 2020, p. 23). They influence our opportunities to be and to do what we value, while also enabling and constraining our agency. Some institutions unequally impact different social groups and exacerbate social division, while progressive institutions may seek to unequally impact different groups to improve social cohesion.

It is recognised across many fields of human activity that we survive and flourish through three functions: distribution/production (under-

stood as primarily taking place in the market economy); redistribution (understood as primarily taking place through the state); and reciprocity (understood as society, community, kin). A reimagined institutional order capable of supporting social, economic, and environmental transformation needs to address the relationship between these three functions. The traditional notion of the 'social contract' offers a theoretical concept and a political device to cohere under an understood social settlement of institutional arrangements across state, market, and society. These social settlements differ across nation states and within subregions, including, in Ireland's case, subregions of Europe. Over the last few decades, Ireland's social settlement is understood as a relatively liberal model where the market (enabled by state policy) plays a large role and where tax effort is constrained. This feeds into uneven levels of state investment across regions and social groups, while underinvestment in social policy leads to inequalities.

The poly/perma crises of climate, care, inequality, digital, and demographic pressures call into question old (imperfect) social contracts, and call for new imaginings of social settlements capable of meeting our human needs within planetary boundaries. Some imagine this can be done within a green form of capitalism, others call for a new eco-social paradigm that needs to resituate freedom and liberty and generate substantive equality in ways that are environmentally sustainable. New institutions need the capacity to promote new norms, or revive old ones. Institutions need to counter behaviours and beliefs that maintain old – and now unsustainable – myths of individualism, competition, consumption, and selfishness (Folbre, 2020; Jackson, 2021). Various ideas for institutional reform, including a care economy, a well-being economy, and an eco-social welfare future, have been offered but there is a sense that society is stuck; unable to imagine, generate, or implement the scale of institutional reform required to reach a new balanced social settlement. An objective of the conference was to enable participants to use the space of the conference to reflect on their own experiences of trying to advance transformative policy. The following section briefly reflects on conversations from the conference.

Conversations from the conference

Conference participants included senior public servants from a number of government departments and statutory agencies, a number

of actors from civil society and non-governmental organisations, and a range of academics and university-based researchers. Participants sat in random groups of five to seven people, and were encouraged throughout the day to collaborate and share experiences, to this end Chris Chapman and Martin Hawkes of the Burren College of Art facilitated table exercises. The morning session sought to draw out participants' views on why institutions become 'stuck' and what needs to be done to become 'unstuck'. In further table-top exercises, participants were encouraged to reflect on how they could work towards imaginative transformative outcomes, while the final session encouraged individual reflection on a key theme that would make a difference.

The conversations delineated between 'hard' and 'soft', or structures and functions versus ways of working and processes that included a focus on collaboration and co-creation and which often stressed the importance of local government reform and capturing the potential role of civil society as a transformative actor. A number of constituent themes included the need to counteract busyness and time constraints (Dunne & Pedersen, 2023), and the reality of stubborn institutional silos (often reinforced by financial reporting systems and requirements). There was a significant focus on the need to invest in building the capacity of national and local state institutions towards a sustainable and transformative state. Participants appeared motivated around the need to imagine and agree a new social contract based on a transformative and careful understanding of just transition.

The plenary session included presentations by two of the conference organisers, these are summarised here as further contributions to conversations at the conference. Donncha Kavanagh (UCD) noted how institutional practices are often less visible and more resilient than institutional structures. One example is the practice of assessing capital investments using 4% as the discount rate, which is an institutional practice that explicitly quantifies the value we accord to benefits accruing to future generations. Lower rates, or rates that decline over time, give more weight to the benefits received by future generations.¹ However, the 4% rate is now so institutionalised

¹ For instance, a discount rate of 4% means that benefits worth €1 million received in 30 years' time have a present value of €308,318, while €1 million received in 50 years' time has a present value of €140,712. If a 2% discount rate is used, then the present values are €552,070 and €371,527, respectively (see Cropper et al., 2014 for development).

that it is difficult to know how it could be changed or even who has responsibility for doing so.

Kavanagh also commented on a range of factors influencing the type of research being conducted in Ireland. He observed how Ireland's research policy had evolved from one in which the state 'made' knowledge through in-house institutions like An Foras Forbartha, to one which now 'buys' knowledge in quasi-markets in which universities, which have been constituted as market actors, compete for funding. But a knowledge market like this is inefficient not least because, since most applications are unsuccessful, researchers waste valuable time and resources submitting unsuccessful applications (Herbert et al., 2013; Link et al., 2008). Moreover, the pressure on academics to publish in international, peer-reviewed journals is impacting the type of research they are willing to engage in. Furthermore, the peer-review system, which is integral to the knowledge market, has been criticised as inefficient, ineffective, and unfair (Ismail et al., 2009; Aczel et al., 2021). Competitive grant schemes also encourage a particular approach to research – the natural science model of collaborative, Principal-Investigator-led teams – that marginalises other ways of doing and understanding research. Kavanagh cited some examples of where a more constructive environment for research are being promoted and tried. One suggestion is that qualified researchers be given a 'universal basic income' rather than ask them to bid for research grants (Matthews, 2017). Another tack, pioneered by the Volkswagen Foundation, Germany's largest private research funder, and now also trialled by the British Academy, is to award some research funds by lottery (Grove, 2022). Another approach, and one that Kavanagh advocates, is for the state to make as well as buy knowledge in the market. This would mean the state building its own research capacity by creating permanent research entities focused on domains of enduring and long-term importance, such as food, the built and natural environments, energy, climate, etc. On this point, it is notable that our interminable housing crisis is surely linked to the absence, since 1993, of a national research centre for the built environment, when An Foras Forbartha was dissolved. The state would still 'buy' knowledge in the knowledge market, but making its own knowledge is also important as skills, datasets, and practices need to persist over the longer term. Also, scale matters.

Scale is central to the ancient Greek virtue of magnificence, which can be understood as giving for the common good at scale.

Magnificent research, then, is research for the common good, conducted at scale. Practically speaking, it means the state should be ambitious in setting up its own large research centres. Some centres, like Teagasc, already exist, others could be created by reimagining existing entities – for instance, the Met Office could be turned into the National Climate Research Centre – but some new centres also need to be established.

Kavanagh also gave other examples of how we might experiment imaginatively with new structures and practices. Examples include:

- Lower the voting age significantly – David Runciman, Cambridge Professor of Politics, advocates lowering the voting age to six (Runciman, 2021).
- Reconstitute the Seanad requiring it to explicitly address the needs of future generations.
- Introduce new forms of voting such as quadratic voting.
- Extend the term of the Dáil to six or seven years to counter the presentist bias that elections engender (Boston, 2017).
- Give greater recognition to the interests, needs, and rights of future generations in relevant constitutional documents.
- Design and embed a strategic foresight capability in the state.
- Use citizens' assemblies as the basis for research prioritisation exercises.
- Insulate decision-making from short-term political pressures.
- Experiment with new practices of workplace democracy, such as electing rather than appointing senior officials in universities.

Dermot O'Doherty of the Futures Forum highlighted the potential of the Futures Forum, invited suggestions for building on the legacies of work inspired by events since its first inaugural 2022 conference and this 2024 conference, and noted two specific suggestions for their contribution to imaginative institutional change.

Sir Geoff Mulgan (<https://www.geoffmulgan.com/>) has a long and distinguished record in new policy development and institution-building. Mulgan stresses the need to learn from histories that document how institutions emerge and change. The lack of a shared body of knowledge and experience about what works for which tasks is a significant problem, as is the related issue of losing organisational memory. To address this, he helped establish the What Works Network (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network>) which aims to improve the way government and other public-sector

organisations create, share, and use high-quality evidence in decision-making. He also co-founded the Institutional Architecture Lab (<https://tial.org/>) which seeks to improve the global practice and theory of designing institutions better able to address the great challenges of our times. He has also been involved in initiating the International Public Policy Observatory (<https://theippo.co.uk/>), which aims to find, distil, and share the best global evidence for policy practice across the United Kingdom, as well as the Evidence for Policy & Practice Information Centre (<https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk>), which conducts systematic reviews across health, education, welfare, and other public policy sectors. O'Doherty noted that the book, *Policy Analysis in Ireland* (Hogan & Murphy, 2021) identifies similar issues and needs in the Irish civil and public services, including the loss of broad and longer-term policy thinking in the state sector, especially in such areas as social policy. There are indications that this situation is beginning to improve, as evidenced by deeper engagement with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which has led to publications such as *Strengthening Policy Development in the Public Sector in Ireland* (OECD, 2023) and *Towards a Strategic Foresight System in Ireland: OECD Policy Brief* (OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, 2021).

O'Doherty also drew attention to the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, a Welsh Government Office based on the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015. This has statutory powers to question and assess the performance of Welsh public policy in 'meeting well-being objectives in accordance with the sustainable development principle'. It can also intervene in specific areas such as transport policy. An interesting idea, relevant to this conference, is its proposal that the Welsh Government should establish a Ministry of Possibilities that would use design thinking and experimentation to tackle critical issues (Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, 2021). The United Arab Emirates already has such a ministry (<https://mop.gov.ae/>), 'created to incubate and solve systemic impossibilities of the government'. O'Doherty asked whether there are lessons here for Ireland.

The three articles

The first article is an edited transcript of the video shown during the morning of the event, where celebrated science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson ('Stan') discussed the conference theme – radical

change requires radical imagination. In conversation with Professor Mary P. Murphy, Stan discussed the role of institutions in social transformation and reflects on how his book, *The Ministry for the Future* – published in 2020 and written prior to the pandemic – opened up a period of reflection about the role of institutions (Robinson, 2020). Describing institutions as the ‘clutch’ that acts as a conduit between ideas and actions in the world, he argued that institutions are necessary and important since we are social creatures, live in a highly populated planet, and must coordinate our actions. However, institutions can get ‘stuck’, are often misaligned, and can be a source of inequality – with differing levels of power, influence, and money. The wide-ranging interview reflected on issues as diverse as knowledge, language, time, acceleration, or speed of change, technology, income inequality, capitalism, and land all tied together through our attempts to mediate them via institutions. Stan discussed the misalignment between national states concerned with sovereignty and global capitalism’s concern with fluidity. He concluded that there is less of an argument for an international institution like a Ministry for the Future and more of a need for every institution to have a role in planning for the future (or futures). The interview concluded with a note of caution as in 2024 one third of the global population will elect new leaders, Stan is nonetheless hopeful about what the future may bring.

The second article reflects the next session, chaired by Ian Hughes (UCC), that addressed the theme of institutional change. The keynote speaker, Wolfgang Polt, from Joanneum Research, Austria, reflected on key learnings from European Union missions projects a new feature of Horizon Europe, the European Commission’s largest research and innovation programme. The five European Union missions – Climate Adaptation, Cancer, Restoring Oceans and Waters, Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, and Healthy Soils. Polt also reflected from his specific role in the leadership of the Austrian missions programme. Noting the complexity of policy-making and the challenges presented by a loss of state capacity over decades, he offered lessons relating to three specific international experiences – Austria, Sweden, and Finland. He outlined a number of best practice examples that focus on regional and thematic issues, as well as different forms of policy and political institutional innovations. These included examples aimed at bringing long-term reflection into policy-making, and new innovations involving both parliaments and citizens assemblies. Polt commented on the Realpolitik of making these

institutions work and recommended distinguishing the 'process of governance of research' from 'governance of specific research projects'.

In response, Maggie O'Neill (UCC) raised the practical reality of academic precarity, which is a direct consequence of reduced university funding and the reorientation of universities around project-based research endeavours. Seán Ó Riain (MU) reflected on the loss of state capacity and what this means for institutional inertia and lack of imagination. Floor contributions reflected on the difficulties senior leaders have in negotiating the institutional relationship between government and universities with implications for research, opening up the question of state capacity to not only identify needs but actually do research.

The final article reflects the plenary discussion which included feedback from three workshops which focused on case studies of institutional imagination and transformation. Each workshop focused on a specific institutional context: (1) Universities (Chair: Linda Doyle (Provost Trinity College Dublin); speakers: Trevor Vaugh (MU), and Maggie O'Neill (UCC)); (2) Cities (Chair: Rob Kitchin (MU); speakers: Brian Ó Gallachóir (UCC) and Wolfgang Polt (Joanneum Research Institute, Austria)); and (3) Public services (Chair: Larry O'Connell, Director National Economic & Social Council); speakers: Orla O'Connor (National Women's Council of Ireland) and Ray Griffin (South East Technological University)). In each workshop, the speakers' contributions led to a discussion by participants on the experiences of attempting imaginative reform towards social transformation. The plenary, chaired by Joanna O'Riordan (Institute of Public Administration), had a theme of active hope and first heard brief reflections from the workshop chairs. The plenary discussion reflected on various institutional experiments, building on what needs to happen across Irish state/society/market to become 'unstuck', the challenges of implementing a just transition in agriculture, and how to proceed when we do not know the answer.

Concluding thoughts

Overall, there was affirmation from conference participants of the need for futures thinking and for more dialogue about and with the future – for example, by back-casting from a vision of a sustainable and socially just future Ireland to build current policy and prioritise different values. The capacity for back-casting is an important

challenge at local, regional, national, and international levels. Developing a national futures collaboration centre with co-participation from public service leadership, the research community and the third sector would be one appropriate institutional response. In the context of the recent local elections, and, in particular that of the first elected mayor in the state, the event highlighted the importance of local institutions and governance, which is an issue that might be addressed by follow-up initiatives. The hope is that the overall conversation, and the disparate communities of practice it reflects, will continue to contribute towards imaginative and transformative change. We hope you enjoy these conference proceedings.

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Conference proceedings articles

