



## Planning and developing tourism within a public sector quagmire: Lessons from and for small countries

Adrian Devine<sup>a,\*</sup>, Frances Devine<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Ulster Business School, University of Ulster (Coleraine Campus), Cromore Road, Coleraine, BT52 1SA, N. Ireland, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup> Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Ulster Business School, University of Ulster (Belfast Campus), York Street, Belfast, BT15, N. Ireland, United Kingdom

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examined public sector tourism in Northern Ireland, a small country on the periphery of Western Europe which is notorious for being over-governed. The authors found that its complex web of public sector tourism bodies created confusion and duplication within the industry. There was a lack of coordination and clear policy guidelines and many of the organisations were suffering from 'partnership overload'. To make matters worse for Northern Ireland its National Tourism Organisation, faced with a reduced remit and shrinking budget, was not capable of making decisions and providing the strategic leadership that is required to drive the tourism agenda forward. Northern Ireland, and indeed any small country involved in tourism, could learn valuable lessons from Northern Ireland's Celtic neighbours, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland, countries which have taken action to remove some of their layers of administration and bureaucracy and make public sector tourism more streamlined and manageable.

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### 1. Introduction

In modern societies work and leisure are differentiated, and in the case of tourism the separation is extreme (Roberts, 2004). Youell (1998) notes how the tourist is separated not just from work but from everyday life, and by place as well as time. Tourism is extreme in the amounts of money that the world's richer people spend and in the huge imbalance between richer and poorer countries. It is also extreme in being one of the most thoroughly commercial leisure industries. Tourism, however, is not one hundred per cent commercial. The public sector has always played a role (Roberts, 2004).

According to Lickorish and Jenkins (1999), in practice, close cooperation with the operating sectors in commercially related functions such as marketing works best in tourism, but government cannot abdicate their responsibilities. Tourism development cannot be left to market forces alone if national benefits are to be secured. In its annual report, the OECD (1991: p. 2) concluded that 'if national tourism planning, promotion and management were left entirely to the private sector, this could result in the unbalanced

development of infrastructure and market expansion, with the risk of growing congestion and increased pressure on environmental resources'.

In contrast to the private sector, the public sector involves government at a variety of geographical scales and may become involved in tourism for various economic, political, social and environmental reasons (Hall & Page, 2006). Dredge and Jenkins (2007) acknowledge that there is almost universal acceptance by governments around the world, regardless of ideology, that tourism is a good thing, with tourism policies being designed to expand the tourist industry. They discuss how government agencies at every level from the international down to small towns have adopted a progressively more active role in the use of tourism as a developmental tool. Indeed, many government agencies currently promote tourism as a panacea for underemployment in economically depressed areas (Page, 2007). However, this is not a new trend, Shaw, Greenwood, and Williams (1988) for example, in their study of the UK in the late 1980s, identified a number of economic considerations that have led to public sector involvement in tourism: improvements in the balance of payments: fostering regional development: diversification of the national economy: increase in public revenue: improvements in income levels: the creation of new employment.

Despite its economic potential however, some governments, especially in the industrialised market-orientated economies, may have no explicit tourism policy (Lickorish & Jenkins, 1999). Kerr

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +2870323960; fax: +2870323997.

E-mail addresses: [Ha.devine@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:Ha.devine@ulster.ac.uk) (A. Devine), [fg.devine@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:fg.devine@ulster.ac.uk) (F. Devine).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +2890267393; fax: +2870323997.

(2003), for example, in his study of tourism policy in Scotland, found that in comparison to other industries tourism was less of a government public policy priority than other sectors. This was due to the general approach of successive UK governments. Although they accepted that there was a need for administration and funding support for the tourism industry, they minimised and marginalised the formal development support roles.

Although there may be occasions when they appear unsupportive, unimaginative, uncooperative, discouraging or preoccupied with other disciplines, the tourism industry could not survive without government intervention. Governments, after all, have the necessary and legitimate power to provide the political stability, social infrastructure, security and the legal and financial framework to smooth the progress and development of tourism (Dredge & Jenkins, 2007). How governments use such powers and how they devise and implement policy and assess its impact will depend upon many factors including their political culture, socio-economic issues, environmental outlook, the political and economic power holders/brokers and, of course, their perception of tourism on their economy and society. Furthermore, such policies will be influenced by the political philosophies and ideological preferences of the government of the day and the minister in charge, combined with the wider political environment in which they find themselves (Edgell, 1999).

The International Union of Tourism Organisations (1974), the forerunner to the World Tourism Organisation, in its discussion of the role of the state in tourism, identified five areas of public sector involvement in tourism: coordination, planning, legislation, regulation and entrepreneur stimulation. Hall and Page (2006) have added two other functions to this list: a social tourism role, which is very significant in European tourism, and a broader role of interest protection. All seven functions are important and although Governments may not spend huge sums of money on tourism compared with their spending on health education, pensions and defence for example, the public sector has a vital role to play in tourism. The private sector recognises this and throughout the world industry representatives lobby central, regional and local government, demanding increased public sector support. Many governments have responded and in some countries, this has led to an increase in the number of public sector agencies with a tourism remit. However, whilst any recognition of the industry is commendable, is it possible for a country to have too many public sector agencies involved in tourism, and if so, what affect does this have on tourism development?

This paper will address this issue by examining public sector tourism in Northern Ireland, a small country on the periphery of Western Europe which is notorious for being over-governed (Knox & Carmichael, 2006). The first section of this paper will provide a brief insight into Northern Ireland's political history which will help explain why the country has become over-administered. The next section looks specifically at Northern Ireland's tourism industry and identifies the area of study. This is followed by the methodology which also introduces the public sector agencies in Northern Ireland which have a tourism remit. The discussion is also broken down into two parts, the first deals with the problems that over-administration has created whilst the second discusses the lessons Northern Ireland can learn from other small countries.

## 2. Northern Ireland's political background

The predominant feature of Northern Ireland political history since the late 1960s has been the struggle for independence. The 'troubles' in Northern Ireland, as they are often referred to, stem from the partition of Ireland. The island was partitioned in 1921, with the twenty six southern counties gaining independence (the Republic of Ireland) and the other six northern counties remaining

part of the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland). However, the majority of Northern Ireland's Catholic/nationalist population were unhappy with this arrangement and wanted a single, united and independent Ireland. It was the civil rights campaign of the late 1960s that galvanised the Catholic/nationalist community and ignited the 'troubles'. The ensuing years of bloodshed and heartache that followed can only be described as a human crisis.

After thirty years of a bloody civil war in which over 3600 people had been killed and over 30,000 injured, the Good Friday Agreement (1998) was signed. This Agreement transformed politics in Northern Ireland. Devolved Government replaced Direct Rule from London thus providing a historic opportunity for the people of Northern Ireland to put aside the divisions and violence of the past and to move forward and build a stable future together.

However, the system of government which operated in Northern Ireland during the 'troubles' continues to have a major impact on how Northern Ireland is governed today. Since the 1970s quangos have become the mainstay of Northern Ireland's governmental architecture (Carmichael & Knox, 2004). Greer (2002) discusses how quangos increased their power in the years of Direct Rule from London as the Secretary of State only spent a few days of the week in Northern Ireland. Knox and Carmichael (2005) argue that quangos and civil servants had an enhanced role and disproportionate influence over the formulation, development and implementation of public policy in Northern Ireland compared to other parts of the United Kingdom (Knox & Carmichael, 2006). For example, in 2002 Northern Ireland had 118 quangos, responsible for an estimated £7 billion out of a total £11 billion public expenditure (NIA, 2009).

Quangos have certainly proved valuable as a tool for administering and delivering public services in a country torn apart by sectarian divisions (Carmichael & Knox, 2004). However, according to Knox and Carmichael (2006), many quangos may well have outlived their usefulness in Northern Ireland despite their creditable showing as a device for political management. Questions of legitimacy and accountability have been raised, accompanied by concern over the efficiency and quality of services given the plethora of bodies that exist. This is in line with Birrell's (2009) argument that Northern Ireland is over-governed or at least, over-administered. Not surprisingly, there have been repeated calls for streamlining. Consequently, a major examination of the system of public administration was launched in June 2002, but Knox and Carmichael (2006) described this Reform of Public Administration (RPA) as little more than institutional tinkering and according to Birrell (2009) the inherent problems remain.

## 3. Northern Ireland's tourism industry

According to Buckley and Klemm (1993) and Wall (1996) the 'troubles' has been the main reason why tourism in Northern Ireland has not developed to its full potential. Between 1969–1971, for example, as violence escalated tourism numbers fell from 1,080,000 to 435,000 (Greer, 2002). The decline in visitor numbers was particularly hard on the holiday market and by 1973 holiday travel accounted for only 7% of all visitors (Symth, 1986). The effects of civil unrest in Northern Ireland led the Financial Times in July 1978 to state that 'apart from whatever else they have done, the bombings, shootings and other horrors which go under the general rubric of 'the troubles' have in the past decade virtually wiped out the Northern Ireland tourist industry' (Financial Times 4 July 1978, cited in Symth, 1986: p. 120).

Not surprisingly tourism in Northern Ireland was affected by the negative media coverage as the region quickly gained an unpleasant image of terrorism (Boyd, 2000; Wall, 1996; Wilson, 1993). Donnelly (2005) discusses how Northern Ireland, and

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