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Reflections on continuity and change in public service reform in Ireland

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Abstract

This article reviews the elements of continuity in the approach to public service reform in Ireland and of change in expectations of public service performance in Ireland over recent decades. It concludes that supporting democratic governance is the primary goal of public service and that trust in its capacity to meet society's needs is the most appropriate criterion to assess reform programmes. It also suggests some priorities for future reform effort.

Keywords: Public service reform, democratic governance

Introduction

It is an honour to be invited to contribute to this special issue of *Administration* marking the contribution of Richard Boyle to the Irish public service and its development. Richard has been an astute analyst of the Irish public service over thirty-five years. His sympathetic engagement with the challenges facing the public service, allied to his analytical rigour, has enabled him to be an effective agent of learning and change. In this, he reflected fully the ambition and vision of those who established the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) more than sixty years ago.

Reflecting on the programmes of public service reform pursued over that period is inevitably shaped by personal experience and, no doubt, prejudice. I joined the Irish civil service in the early 1970s when

it was energised by debate on the Devlin report on its organisation, and by the prospect of Ireland's entry to the then European Economic Community (EEC), seen as widening professional as well as economic horizons. Later, as Secretary General to the Government and of the Department of the Taoiseach, I experienced both the highs and lows of public and political opinion of the performance of the Irish civil service. Since retirement, experience in the non-profit sector has influenced my increasingly detached perspective on how the system which I served for forty years might appropriately be assessed.

Reflections must also be influenced by context. The dramatic challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and the public policy response have tested all elements of the Irish public service and thrown into sharp relief its role in Irish society. More broadly, the rise of populism internationally, the decline of trust in institutions and in traditional forms of expertise, the fractures in the received international political system, and the impact of the globalised economy all challenge the liberal democratic order of which the public service is a key pillar. The reality of Brexit and its imminent dislocation of economic and political relations with our neighbours pose serious challenges to what has been one of the unambiguously successful efforts of the Irish political and administrative system. All of these challenges and uncertainties necessarily influence how we would want to assess the Irish public service, as we now approach the centenary of its establishment.

Overview of development of the Irish public service

The Irish public service exists to support the democratically elected government to achieve and sustain what British philosopher A. C. Grayling has called the 'good state', defined as 'one all of whose citizens live in peace and flourish, enjoying rights and freedoms that provide the basis of their flourishing' (Grayling, 2020, p. 71).

Looking back at the history of the Irish public service, it is no surprise that the establishment of peace – in the sense of public order – and asserting the authority of the democratically elected government should be the dominant concerns. Established to serve a government fighting for independence, and formed in the teeth of civil war, it is not surprising that ensuring public and institutional stability and containing the threat of subversion should frame the nascent state's administrative sensibility. Adshead has argued that this overriding priority gave primacy to the achievement of autonomy for the state at the cost of limited state capacity and, as such, it helped to fix

‘the authoritarian, centralising and conservative aspects of Irish democracy’ (Adshead, 2008, p. 60).

Watchfulness for subversion has been a recurring concern for Irish public administration down to our own time, when a wider range of terrorist capacities require vigilance on the part of those serving the democratic order. This core defensiveness gave focus to what was arguably the prime asset of the newly independent state: a professional and impartial public service committed to democratic government in the Whitehall tradition. Ireland has maintained that Whitehall tradition arguably more faithfully than Whitehall itself!

Part of that tradition was the structural dominance of the Treasury and an associated fiscal mindset. It has been argued that within that framework, and imbued with Catholic suspicion of state power, senior officials were oriented ‘to prevent the state from acquiring interventionist capabilities, to protect private property and their own free-market orthodoxy from incursions’ (Adshead, 2008, p. 63). Such a mindset was consistent with the woefully weak national system of innovation, defined as the interaction of institutions, resources, skills and market opportunities, that prevailed following independence. Mjoset (1993) has argued that the recourse to exit, rather than voice, through emigration, generation after generation, shaped a conservative and patriarchal society. Nevertheless, the Irish state through this period of economic torpor maintained a comparatively positive record of respect for individual rights and robust adherence to the rule of law, when this was far from prevalent in Europe. Buckley (2017) argues that the ‘benevolent secularism’ of the period was a significant civic achievement in the circumstances of post-independence Ireland.

The decisive refocusing outwards of the Irish state in response to potentially terminal economic and social decline in the 1950s required a reorientation of both the political and the administrative systems, embodied in the complementary roles of Lemass and Whitaker. The execution of this outward pivot was dependent on public service capacity, enhanced through the establishment of specialist agencies with well-defined goals and freedom of action to pursue external investment. Meanwhile, the core civil service focused on creating the framework for internationalisation by preparing for free trade and ultimately entry to the EEC. The expectations of public service performance switched from the maintenance of a stable and inward-facing society to a demand for greater international engagement and more rapid development.

In this context it was no surprise that the Irish public service's fitness for purpose should have been the subject of extensive public debate and, through the Public Services Organisation Review Group, rigorous enquiry. The consequent Devlin report, produced by a group whose members included the Director of the IPA, provided a blueprint for structural change to enable the civil service to be a more active instrument of economic and social development (Public Services Organisation Review Group, 1969). Its diagnosis of a lack of senior engagement with, and organisational space for, longer-term issues, and a need for systematic training and the professionalisation of key management functions within departments found little political or, with some exceptions, public service support. However, the Devlin focus on structure, capacity and a more strategic approach was to find echoes in successive reform efforts down to the present.

Programmes of public service reform

The past forty years have seen a series of public programmes of public service reform. The emphasis in the 1980s was on deepening the merit principle for senior appointments in the civil service, while emphasising the importance of change management and greater accountability at those levels. The title of the 1985 White Paper – *Serving the Country Better* – reflected the view that public service performance was key to meeting the expectations of a better-educated and more demanding population (Government of Ireland, 1985). However, the economic crisis of the late 1980s led to a shift from a focus on retooling the machinery of government to the task of leading a broad-based economic recovery and fiscal adjustment. This was symbolised by the abolition of the Department of the Public Service and the transfer of its functions back to a Department of Finance focused on reducing public service numbers and costs, while a deeper tripartite process of social dialogue was begun, coordinated from the Department of the Taoiseach.

The next major reform programme, the Strategic Management Initiative (SMI), was launched in 1994. Murray (2001) observed that this was more accurately described as an agenda of renewal rather than reform because 'it was neither imposed nor forced (but) emerged from the concerns of senior civil servants about the current performance of the system over which they presided and its ability to meet the challenges of supporting an effective state for the 21st century'. These origins echo those of the IPA itself a generation earlier, but in this case the initiative was endorsed and incorporated

into public policy by a government willing to give the system its head in attempting to translate dramatic economic gains into sustained social progress.

The SMI, as described in the centrepiece manifesto *Delivering Better Government*, echoed concerns going back to the Devlin report regarding the lack of attention in the system to emerging challenges and longer-term issues (Department of the Taoiseach, 1996). A more strategic approach to goal setting and business planning was proposed to rebalance this orientation. Greater coherence and consistency of administrative effort would be achieved by grounding the strategic goals of departments in the stated priorities of the government. There were echoes of Devlin, too, in the emphasis on the need for more professional human resource and financial management and better deployment of information technology. In addition to a sharper strategic edge, the goal was to develop a civil service which would deliver quality services; operate openly and transparently; adopt a customer focus; apply smarter, rather than more, regulation; manage cross-departmental issues more effectively; and provide high-quality policy advice to the government. In part, this reform agenda can be seen as a professional response to the challenge of being accountable to the political system: replacing the Faustian pact of mutual protection between ministers and officials with a performance contract, by which the administrative system would undertake to equip itself to deliver what the political system required, if officials were mandated to design and implement that renewal.

The SMI reflected esteem for management practice in the private sector and belief that a New Public Management, incorporating these techniques, would perform more efficiently and effectively. In this, Irish practice reflected international trends in public service modernisation. While less committed than some to market forces as the optimal allocator of resources, Irish practice did accept the desirability of separating the funding of public services from their delivery, thus opening a wide space for marketisation and outsourcing. It was no surprise that new approaches to the delivery of public services should be adopted towards the end of the 1990s, 'since Irish society had resources available to it that were hitherto unimaginable, including economic, institutional and cultural resources' (Ó Riain, 2014, p. 58). Yet, even as a new national system of innovation had been developed that supported a sustainable export base, 'it also faced major challenges and contradictions in its model of development' (Ó Riain, 2014, p. 56).

The apparent dramatic success of the Irish economy, and a belief that public service performance had underpinned it through the expansion of existing programmes and innovation in areas like social inclusion and local development, produced a tangible cooling of the ardour for further reform by the end of the 1990s. In reality, while collegiate mechanisms to lead change had produced results, they were less impactful than the power of external scrutiny, such as the audits of the Comptroller and Auditor General, reporting to the Public Accounts Committee. I felt strongly in the early 2000s that an equivalent external impetus was required for the modernisation process as a whole. It was in this context that the then Taoiseach announced that the OECD would conduct an external review of the Irish public service and that a system of external performance appraisal of departments would commence through the Organisation Review Programme. A new mechanism to reflect the vision of an integrated public service was also introduced in the form of a Senior Public Service, which would promote mobility and personal development, emulating the impressive practice of the Irish military.

The subsequent reform efforts have displayed a strong degree of continuity in the Irish approach to modernisation: collegiate leadership, skills development and professionalisation, lateral mobility as an instrument of system cohesion, and efficient delivery to customers. There have been developments in both machinery and process, but they reflect the same underlying philosophy of reform. This has been expressed in successive public service reform plans adopted by the government and supported by the work of the Public Service Reform Programme Management Office in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Overseen by a cabinet committee, the central direction of the process is led by the Civil Service Management Board, supported by a sophisticated network of cross-sectoral initiatives with well-defined arrangements for sponsorship, management and support. An external and comparative perspective continues to be supplied by the OECD, whose assessment of the *Public Service Reform Plan 2014–16* highlighted the substantial progress made in areas such as digital government and shared services (OECD, 2017). The OECD pointed to a deepened capacity for innovation as key to the ongoing public service change required by a changing society, and the crucial role of senior leadership in developing that capacity. These recommendations have been taken up in the current public service reform plan, *Our Public Service 2020* (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2019).

This overview of continuity and change suggests that public service reform is best seen as an unending quest and that progress can be assessed only by reference to the needs of the society being served.

Policy advice

One of the core functions of the public service is to support political decision-making with information and advice, including that based on the implementation of existing policies. As has been observed, ‘there is no substitute for good policies and there are few remedies for bad ones, if that is what a government chooses to produce with the machinery it inherits and runs’ (Institute for Government, 2020).

The relative responsibilities of public servants and politicians for policy formulation are often opaque. Despite the intention of reform efforts to disentangle their respective domains of responsibility, there is a necessary symbiosis in the Whitehall tradition. Attempts to create new accountability frameworks within the structures of public administration are constrained by the inevitable read across into the domain of political accountability, where different criteria and dynamics necessarily apply. Moving away from a mutual protection pact between minister and civil servant, conducted in shadows, risks arriving at another extreme, which would ultimately require public servants to behave politically. Avoiding politicisation through effective administrative accountability requires, at a minimum, clarity of role and responsibility, both for individuals and in the remit of units within organisations. The Effectiveness and Renewal Group in the Department of Justice, of which I was a member, concluded that structural change in that organisation towards a functional model (echoing elements of the Devlin report) was needed to provide the role clarity required to enhance effectiveness, as well as accountability (Department of Justice and Equality, 2018). Failure by the public service to demonstrate effective accountability risks imperilling the continuation of the structures and norms which protect its independence.

Effective policy development, supported by appropriate frameworks of accountability, underpins the legitimacy of the state and its institutions. Hardiman (2012) points out that political legitimacy depends on ‘output’ efficiency – that is, the perception of policy effectiveness – as well as on ‘input’ legitimacy, based on electoral representation. It is clear that the citizens of many states have lost confidence in the capacity of the institutions of politics and public administration to secure their interests and meet their needs.

The impact of the financial crisis of 2008–10, the dislocations caused by globalisation and technological change, the impact of migration, the poor quality and high cost of life in cities, and the depopulation of rural areas have bred significant alienation in many countries. Rising inequality and ecological degradation associated with climate change have produced widespread pessimism about the future. The rise of populist political forces and deep civic polarisation have combined to threaten the stability of liberal democracy, or at least the stability of the institutions which have been its expression in the West over the past seventy-five years.

In Ireland, too, there has been political expression of dissatisfaction with the management of the economic fallout from the financial crisis, and with significant failures in the areas of health and housing to meet public demands. What had been seen in official eyes as a necessary and successful adjustment programme following the financial crisis was construed very differently by others, who interpreted the policy of austerity as a result of ‘right-wing opportunism’ to further a right-wing agenda, or at least as ‘a policy that was in many respects unnecessary and was applied too early and too heavily’ (Allen, 2017, p. 69).

The Irish public service is now operating in a political context quite different from that which shaped its traditions and its recent reform programmes. In the past, it was observed that the Irish state was ‘pragmatic and opportunistic, with no ideological hang-ups at all’ (Adshead, 2008, p. 69), reflected in ‘limited if no ideological differentiation, and wholesale areas of consensus, between political parties outside and within office’ (Adshead, 2008, p. 71).

The Irish public service must develop its policy capacity to engage with political debates which reflect a broader range of ideological positions and contrasting policy objectives than in the past. It must secure the confidence of democratically elected governments that it has the means to develop fresh perspectives on key policy questions, and the skills and energy required to frame policies and programmes that depart from settled practice. Even within the framework of more traditional politics, doubts may arise as to the capacity of a public service, whose impartiality is shaped by long convention, to deliver the transformational change deemed necessary, as reflected in the Ditchley Annual Lecture delivered recently by a senior UK minister (Gove, 2020). What is clear is that questions of public service performance and reform are likely to be the subject of political attention and controversy to a greater degree than over past decades.

Reflecting on the Covid-19 experience

What may be expected of the Irish public service, and how it may meet that challenge, can perhaps be illuminated by reflecting on the Covid-19 pandemic. The emergency gave rise to systemic questions which share characteristics with other key challenges, such as securing a just transition to a more sustainable economic model, or equipping society to cope with the impact of radical technological change, such as wider deployment of artificial intelligence.

It was striking that there was virtually universal expectation that the state and its institutions would exercise their capacity for leadership and direction. The potential of a strong state to secure the well-being of its citizens, not only their health but also their incomes and employment prospects, was demonstrated through decisive action and robust technical expertise. The acceleration of decision-making and the radical measures to reframe regulatory regimes at the onset of the pandemic were seen as proportionate to the scale of the crisis and reflected strong public expectations. These in turn were influenced by frank and consistent official communication, building confidence that the common good was being placed above partisan advantage.

The emergency response also involved the mobilisation of civil society. Key economic actors played a role in shaping the regulatory and fiscal responses. Local government, An Garda Síochána, An Post and other public services responded creatively within the framework of national policy. Restrictions on movement highlighted the reality that the care of the most vulnerable and the maintenance of well-being rely on mutual support in local communities. It was the vibrancy of community life and the creativity of voluntary organisations which enabled flexible and humane support to be provided, beyond the capacity of public policy and programmes.

As the imperative nature of the public health crisis has transitioned to a more variable risk profile, and the scope for policy responses has become wider and more contestable, consensus has fractured. In these circumstances, public policy requires deeper engagement and sustained communication to build legitimacy and secure consistent behaviour on the part of the population. In this, as in many key policy challenges, trust in the motivation and capacity of the public service is the key to successful policy implementation.

It is reasonable to suggest that, ultimately, the best criterion by which to judge the public service and its reform is the degree of trust in public administration, based on competent delivery of services that

meet the needs of the population, and on creative and decisive policymaking informed by wide engagement and deep communication.

Towards an agenda for future change

There are three broad areas which seem to me to merit particular attention in the period ahead. These are additional to the ongoing development of capacity and personnel, and the smart deployment of information technology, which, in all circumstances, will require continued energetic leadership. They are: the search for coherence and integration, the need for engagement and deliberation, and attending to the roots of liberal democracy.

Integration

The search for joined-up government has been a key dimension of public service reform over the past twenty years, in Ireland as elsewhere. Integration has been a necessary corrective to the specialisation of structure and function produced by the widening range of government responsibilities. Coherent policymaking and accountability require clearly defined organisational parameters, but these easily become silos in which disjointed policies and programmes develop. There is limited potential for redrawing the boundaries of central government departments to achieve greater integration. Logic suggests that the place to seek integration is close to the citizen, to provide a flexible response attuned to varying needs. The preservation of departmental or agency fiefdoms should yield to integrating delivery mechanisms. At the very heart of the system of government we balance collective responsibility with individual ministerial leadership of departments. An equivalent balance is required at the other end of the spectrum of government.

Traditionally, our state has been wary of local government and its performance, yet the capacity of good local government leadership to effect transformational change is evident. The crafting of effective delivery mechanisms to enable public policy and resources to be combined to produce optimal outcomes for communities, families and individuals is a worthy policy goal. Local government is well placed to undertake this task. Equally, the voluntary sector has shown great capacity to broker services on behalf of and with the support of public agencies, including local government. As demonstrated by the creative response during the recent pandemic, local voluntary effort enables

communities to contribute both to articulating and to meeting their own needs with a degree of focus and inclusiveness beyond the scope of policy prescriptions. A devolved system of administration, which mandated experimentation in the delivery of core and discretionary services, would go far to develop the capacity for innovation in the Irish public service called for by the OECD.

Deliberation

It has been said that democracy is the art of government by persuasion. Governments can best achieve their goals when the behaviour of key interests and the population as a whole is at least broadly consistent with the direction of policy. This is even more the case for small open economies, where the levers available to government are necessarily limited.

For that reason, the Irish state has pursued structured engagement with what have come to be called the social partners over the past sixty years. While this process of social dialogue has taken different forms, at its best it is a process of two-way communication, in which the possibility of change in perspective exists whenever the evidence and the weight of argument so indicate. This is especially important where public policy requires the active participation of stakeholders as co-producers of the desired outcome, such as in the response to climate change. This requires real engagement, not nominal consultation. My own experience as director, and later chair, of the National Economic and Social Council confirmed to me the value of a forum where robust, continuing and respectful dialogue took place with the full engagement of senior officials. The more recent experience with the Citizens' Assembly shows the power of, and the appetite for, constructive engagement in debating and responding to key social challenges.

The Irish public service will equip itself well to lead the discernment of effective policy choices by providing space for such deliberation and engaging energetically with all who have a contribution to make.

Affirming liberal democracy

The constitutional framework within which the Irish public service operates is predicated on a political and civic culture supportive of liberal democracy. International trends clearly indicate that this is not to be taken for granted. Indeed, in the period ahead the defence of democratic values may well become a serious challenge for the Irish public service. This may require the assertion and robust defence of

the political impartiality of the public service. In a more fractured and divided political system, where political opponents are portrayed as enemies, and political debates become culture wars, the pressure on the administrative system to align with those holding power may intensify. In such an environment, public servants will need to demonstrate that their commitment to the common good and the rule of law necessarily qualifies their loyalty to those holding office.

Defending liberal democracy is not just about how the public service itself behaves, or how it interacts with the political system. It is also about defending the institutions and culture of liberal democracy, including a vibrant civil society, a free press, respect for the rights and reputation of others, and a particular concern for minorities and the promotion of social inclusion. These are not matters in respect of which the public service can be indifferent. In framing policy advice, the public service needs to be alive to the wider context within which it operates. It is, of course, for democratically elected governments to determine policy goals and priorities within the law, but it is for the public service, in its role of speaking truth to power, which its independence makes possible, to be robust in naming those things which make for a stronger or weaker democracy. For example, respecting the established role of trade unions, in bringing about sustainable well-being and a more equitable distribution of income, would support the liberal democratic order. Similarly, voluntary organisations are not the same as commercial contractors in creating social value; public procurement rules which equate them would risk weakening an important pillar of a flourishing civil society.

Conclusion

The Irish public service was established with a clear sense of mission to defend the legitimacy and autonomy of an independent Irish state. It would be appropriate to mark the centenary of its establishment with a renewed sense of the core values which lie at the heart of that role and tradition. Beyond matters of technical capacity and competence, it is surely these values which make for a successful public service. It is no surprise that the first priority listed by the OECD (2019) in articulating to governments the principles for a fit-for-purpose public service should be a values-driven culture and leadership which promote values-based decision-making. A century on from independence and in a radically changed context there is still a need to prioritise the defence of liberal democracy. Ongoing

programmes of public service reform will serve that goal if they build trust and confidence in the public service to meet the needs and aspirations of the people.

The contribution of Richard Boyle to the Irish public service and its modernisation has been focused on how to ensure that it is fit for purpose, not only through what it delivers but also through how it performs. There is a continuing need for the critical support of analysts such as Richard if the public service is to continue to adapt to the needs of a changing society. The IPA made it possible for Richard and his colleagues to make that contribution. The Institute has a continuing role to play in promoting an informed and engaged public service, and in widening appreciation of the challenges and achievements of the public service. A dedicated space for analysis, debate and learning which brought public servants, politicians, media, business, trade unions and non-profit leaders into dialogue would serve not only to provide rich material for analysts but to enhance the prospects of establishing a 'good state' through good public policy and administration.

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