



The civil service and development

T. K. Whitaker

Editor's introduction

Administration published a number of papers by T. K. Whitaker in both Irish and English over a period of twenty-five years, spanning his time as Secretary of the Department of Finance and subsequently as a senator. We thought it would be fitting to reproduce one of those papers here. 'The Civil Service and Development' was published in Volume 9 of the Journal in 1961. It reproduces an address given by Whitaker to the Conference on Higher Administrative Studies in Killarney on 3 May 1961. More than half a century later his reflections remain insightful and pertinent.

You had the honour ten days ago of an address from the Taoiseach on the organisation behind the Economic Programme. It was a far-ranging and thought-provoking address and the least I might do in acknowledgment of it is to offer a few comments as a contribution to the debate which the Taoiseach intended to stimulate.

The Taoiseach's main question was how far the civil service as at present organised can contribute effectively to a dynamic policy of economic development. The Taoiseach was good enough to refer to the more active part which Departments are playing in generating new ideas and to the 'positive stimulating attitude' of the Department of Finance. Indeed, the Government have been most generous in acknowledging the help received from the public service in the preparation of their Programme for Economic Expansion. Yet it would be fair to say that the question uppermost in the Taoiseach's mind was whether the attitude engendered and developed by and

under the present system does not need to be changed to meet present needs.

It is no answer to this question to adopt a self-righteous pose. It can, of course, be said that the civil service is not a passive, unprogressive institution which has failed to recognise the need for adapting itself to the modern concept of the public interest. Having said that, however, the only right course is to go on to examine whether some reforms in outlook, or organisation, are needed to enable us play a more effective part in promoting national progress.

In reviewing an administrative system which is rooted in sound principles and has served the public well, the possibilities of reform should be thoroughly explored before the question of fundamental modification is raised, even in particular areas of responsibility.

This is not to argue that there have not been instances – and may not be others – in which a particular function can be better discharged by an agency other than a Department. But this hiving off can be effective only where policy is clearly determined and not liable to change or where there is a definite executive job to be done; it is not likely, for instance, that any Government will decide that exports should not be promoted or tourism encouraged, or that a Department will be considered to be a better agency to provide a transport service than CIÉ. There are, however, wide areas in which policy cannot be fixed for any prolonged definite period and these are the areas in which new ideas in relation to development possibilities are most likely to emerge. I doubt if any agency is as qualified to operate in these broad fields of policy as is the traditional Department of State. Certainly, it would be well to make sure before creating any new agency that the purpose cannot be effectively served by an existing Department or by some adjustment of the existing Departmental system.

The Departmental system has some special virtues which match those possessed by the alternative system of State-sponsored bodies. The activities of Departments in matters of common concern can be more readily co-ordinated by the Government; Departments have an identity of structure and a strictly competitive system of selection of personnel; they have uniformity in organisation and pay which facilitates mobility and allays jealousy, and a tradition which makes for thorough and efficient participation in the formulation of policy as well as for loyalty in its execution. Above all, Departments are an integral part of a democratic constitutional system of Government. Ministers remain not only fully responsible to Parliament for

what their Departments do but fully in charge of an organisation which has no policy commitments of its own. They have at their disposal personnel who, by tradition and training, are ready to offer advice in an independent but helpful spirit when policy is being formed and to give effect faithfully to whatever policy Ministers may decide upon.

The question of the best distribution of functions between organisations requires careful study but, as far as the civil service is concerned, reform from within is, in my view, more a matter of re-orientation of outlook, of recognition and acceptance of wider personal responsibilities, than of any big change in organisational structure. What is needed is a more lively and general appreciation by the civil service of the part it can and should play in promoting national development. This part must always be a subordinate one – the responsibility for economic policy rests with the Government and, as the Taoiseach said, policy is largely concerned with realising the ‘vast dynamic of growth inherent in free private enterprise’ – but the Government rightly expect a significant contribution from the public service if only because of its special qualifications, experience and access to information.

As I see it, this contribution can take two forms, which tend to merge into one another. First, the day-to-day stimulus which the senior officers of a Department can give to new thinking about the proper functions of the Department and the best way of discharging them. One good way of providing this stimulus is by having a number of committees always at work examining problems connected with the review or formulation of policy – such a committee, for example, as the Department of Agriculture have just set up to study means of alleviating the problems of the small farm. I have not forgotten that Newman said ‘Living movements do not come out of committees’. It is the attitude of the individual that really counts; from him the ideas must come. But individuals with ideas and a proper sense of responsibility can be very effective as members of a committee and this seems the best way, in the civil service, of harnessing the enthusiasm of individuals. It is a good idea to have the younger officers of a Department engaged in such committees – it takes them outside their ordinary field of duty and gives them fresh interests and scope for constructive thinking. It is also appropriate to have representatives on such committees of outside Departments (including Finance) and, at times, of State-sponsored bodies with related responsibilities. When proposals emerge from such joint investigations, they are likely to be

sounder and more easily understood, and, therefore, to stand a better chance of acceptance.

Secondly, the invigorating influence generated within Departments should be made felt on a broader front by the continuation and extension of the procedure which enabled useful assistance to be given to the Government in the formulation of the Programme for Economic Expansion. This brings us to the central, coordinating role of the Department of Finance. The co-operative effort which produced 'Economic Development' should not be regarded as a once-for-all achievement. The Department of Finance has now, as an integral part of its organisation, a special division whose responsibility is to seek out ways and means of advancing economic growth and to develop ideas and projects to the point at which they can be placed with the appropriate Department or agency. While the Department is as keen as ever on securing efficiency and economy in public services and must still eye critically all proposals for new expenditure, its broader concern is with the problems involved in the management of the economy in the interests of steady and rapid national progress. This evolution is an example of a Department adapting its organisation and outlook to a new concept of its functions. Such a difficult purpose as that of ensuring steady economic progress can be achieved only on the basis of good co-operative relations between Departments. These can be preserved only by frequent contact – by what the communiques call 'full and frank discussion' – and by joint participation in the preparations of well-integrated proposals for economic development.

The sound economic management I speak of is necessarily also progressive management, adapting itself flexibly to changes in conditions and needs. It has two foci – the annual budget and the five-year programme. Even within a year, that is, between one budget and another, financial or monetary changes – or even both – may be necessary to keep the economy moving steadily in the right direction. But this direction should be determined on a more long-term basis and the long-range purposes, set in the framework of a five-year programme, should be pursued with as much tenacity as possible from year to year despite any departures necessitated by temporary vicissitudes. Since the psychological value of a broad statement of economic objectives would be lost by too frequent changes and adjustments, it is important that such interim revisions as may be necessary will be reasonably consistent with the general structure of the programme. But this is not to say that the process of re-appraisal

and the search for new ideas should not be constantly in progress behind the scenes, under the auspices of the Department of Finance, so that the next five-year programme will be in draft for Government consideration well before the current one has reached its term. I do not mean to suggest that much of the existing programme will not remain valid but some changes will be necessary in the light of experience and of altered circumstances. The necessary fact-finding, analysis and preparatory work cannot be done efficiently in less than a year; indeed, it will probably take well over a year. Accordingly, the half-way point we have now reached in the programme launched in November, 1958, is, I think, the appropriate point at which to set in motion again, this time perhaps on a broader front than the purely economic, the procedures by which the groundwork was laid for the 1958 programme.

If I were asked, here and now, what particular points need attention in economic programming, I would certainly include the following:

- i. The psychological factor which, in my view, is, and for long will remain, the most important factor of production in Ireland. This means that it is vital to sustain an atmosphere of enterprise and progress. In such an atmosphere we shall not allow ourselves to be over-awed by future difficulties or to fall into despondency by reason of temporary reverses and setbacks. If enterprise is wedded to realism we can advance. The note of realism must be constantly heard and it is better to surpass one's declared aims than to fall short of them.
- ii. One of the points which personally I have often stressed is the need to provide acceptable living standards if we are to combat emigration. In 'Economic Development' doubt was expressed whether the opportunities of development are great enough to give all who are born in Ireland a standard living they would accept, though, as was stated, there are advantages of living here not to be reckoned in money terms. Some thoughtful commentators have deduced from this the need for some positive effort to influence ideas in Ireland on what living standards are suitable for and should be accepted by a Christian community of independent spirit and limited class distinctions. I think there is scope here for a moulding of public opinion, though I am sure this is not primarily a civil service function.

- iii. Some forms of social change are inevitable, much though we may regret them. Change can, however, take place at a rate which may be disruptive of local society and has to be moderated by economic and social measures. Some of the flight from the land is inevitable – there are many farms, consisting of 10 or 15 acres of poor land, which no foreseeable development can make yield an acceptable livelihood. There remains, however, the necessity of doing everything possible to increase the effective economic capacity of the smaller farms. As you know, the possibilities in this regard are being specially investigated.
- iv. Connected with this, is the need to revitalise communities which have been denuded by emigration – where the economic forces have already spent themselves in the sense that enough land may now be available to provide those who are left with viable holdings. Those who have stayed on are, however, naturally dispirited by the departure of so many of their neighbours and relations and need to have their morale and sense of community restored. There is scope for a rallying of all the help available – psychological, social and economic – from the various persons and bodies, private and public, able to provide it in each particular area. Voluntary organisations have, of course, a part to play here.
- v. Another important aspect of future programming is the adjustment required in our economy to new trading relations in Europe. This has been overhanging us for some time but is now much closer and its significance is that it will force upon us a tempo of change much faster than we would ourselves choose but which we must accept if we are to maintain, not to speak of improving, our competitiveness in export markets.
- vi. There is also need for a thorough reconsideration, based on competent preliminary research, of local taxation and local finance generally, a reconsideration which may raise the question of the proper allocation of functions between local authorities and the Central Government, as well as the question of the most efficient organisation of local services.

I could mention other special topics but I have said enough to show that Departments will have quite a lot to think about in relation to future national development. There will be great need for continued close and generous co-operation and no room for senseless rivalry. I said earlier that reform of the civil service was primarily a matter of a change of outlook, a personal recognition of new responsibilities.

I am not sure now if the biggest problem after all will not be one of organisation – how Secretaries and other senior officers can organise their time and work so as to get away from their desks and the harassing experiences of everyday sufficiently to read, consider and consult with others in order to be able to give sound and comprehensive advice on future development policy.