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T. K. Whitaker



In September 2008 the Institute of Public Administration organised the key conference to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of *Economic Development*, the policy document which symbolised Ireland's economic transformation in the 1950s. Just a few days earlier, in the US, the giant financial services firm Lehman Brothers had failed, an event widely seen as symbolising the onset of the great crash of 2008. Uncertainty was in the air. The media and the conference delegates who had assembled at Dublin Castle questioned whether a serious economic reversal was imminent. The irony of timing was not lost on them – some were already saying: 'We need a new Whitaker'.

Thomas Kenneth Whitaker was born in 1916, just months after the Rising, in Rostrevor, County Down. By the time the family moved to Drogheda, in 1922, Ireland had been partitioned and the Civil War was underway.

He was educated by the Christian Brothers in Drogheda, where among other things he acquired his love of the Irish and French languages. In later life, he was confident enough to converse in French with President de Gaulle and Prime Minister Pompidou when the official Irish delegation met them in the Élysée Palace in 1967 to discuss Ireland's bid for membership of the EEC. He felt that this wasn't bad for a Christian Brothers' boy.

Whitaker joined the civil service in 1934, having come first in the entrance examination for Clerical Officer. He recalled that his starting salary was less than £2 per week. He subsequently climbed the career ladder by successively topping the examinations for Executive Officer, Assistant Inspector of Taxes (where he first heard the term economics!) and Administrative Officer; the last of which led him to join the Department of Finance in 1938. By 1956, at age 39, he was Secretary General.

He relished working in the Department of Finance, where he experienced great *esprit de corps* both at and outside of work. Staff were prepared to put in long hours during the week and, if necessary, at weekends, without extra pay. He recalled fondly that, outside of work, he and his Finance colleagues cut turf together on their turbary plot in the Dublin Mountains. No doubt, this was the spirit which was drawn upon for the unselfish work that went into *Economic Development*. Whitaker felt fortunate also in his dealings with successive Ministers of Finance. He had a particularly high regard for Seán Lemass, both as Minister for Finance and as Taoiseach, admiring his qualities of leadership and decisiveness and his ability to master a brief and work with the civil service. In all he spent thirty-one years in the Department of Finance, thirteen as Secretary General. In 1969 he moved to the Central Bank as Governor until his retirement in 1976.

Rising from Clerical Officer to Secretary General of the Department of Finance and Governor of the Central Bank runs the gamut of possibilities for talent in the civil service. That talent would be tested by the conditions of Ireland in the 1950s when low pay, unemployment and emigration were central facts of economic life. Indeed, Whitaker was prompted to act by a cartoon in *Dublin Opinion* portraying Ireland as a beautiful but bedraggled woman asking, 'Have

I a future?’ In 2008, looking back, he recalled that the middle years of the 1950s ‘plumbed the depths of hopelessness’.

Through 1957 and 1958, Whitaker and his main collaborator, Charlie Murray from the Department of An Taoiseach, along with others such as Maurice Doyle and Tomás Ó Cofaigh, worked on drafts of *Economic Development*. The extended team included Maurice Horgan, Dónal Ó Loinsigh, Seámus Ó Ciosáin, Jim Dolan and Brendan Menton. The agents of change came in civil service suits! They worked on their own initiative and in their own time to produce the seminal economic growth document of twentieth century Ireland. It was published officially and acknowledged as the work of Whitaker and his team.

Contained in amongst the detail of *Economic Development* were the seeds of new thinking. It signalled the shift from economic protectionism, which had characterised the first generation since Independence, to free trade, which was to define subsequent generations and see Ireland become one of the most open economies in the world. *Economic Development*, which formed the basis of the government’s First Programme for Economic Expansion, found a path for Ireland to the modern world. It was as if the country had crossed a psychological threshold. As such, it and its author are pivotal reference points in twentieth century Irish history. Indeed, Whitaker was voted Irish Person of the Twentieth Century in a poll conducted by RTÉ. President Michael D. Higgins described him as the ‘most influential Irish person of the last century’.

Whitaker’s two other policy preoccupations were Northern Ireland and the Irish language. From the outset, when it came to proposals for constitutional change, he favoured the principle of majority consent in Northern Ireland; a view which was vindicated with the passage of time. In the early 1960s he got to know the then Northern Ireland Finance Minister, Terence O’Neill, at International Monetary Fund and World Bank meetings. When O’Neill became Northern Ireland Premier, Whitaker played a prominent role in arranging visits by the Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, to Stormont in 1965 and 1967. These breakthrough meetings were early and tentative steps towards more normal relations between North and South. Whitaker also took part in high-level discussions in Belfast and London, including on constitutional issues, with high-ranking British politicians such as Jim Callaghan and William Whitelaw. Even after he left his post in the Department of Finance in 1969 he continued to advise Taoiseach Jack Lynch on Northern Ireland affairs.

He was also deeply interested from an early age in the Irish language. At the policy level, he was involved in drafting the White Paper on the Irish language in 1965 and was Chairman of Bord Na Gaeilge. At the cultural level, he took the initiative in arranging the collaboration between Thomas Kinsella and Seán Ó Tuama which led to *An Duanaire: Poems of the Dispossessed*, an anthology of poems from the early seventeenth century to the nineteenth century about the disposed Irish after the Battle of Kinsale.

Whitaker retired in 1976 after some forty-one years of service. He still had forty-one years to live, and he led a fully active retirement. He was a non-party Senator in the fourteenth and fifteenth Seanad, nominated by Taoisigh Jack Lynch and Garret FitzGerald, respectively. He succeeded Éamon de Valera as Chancellor of the National University of Ireland. He chaired the Committee of Inquiry into the Penal System, the Sentence Review Group, the Common Fisheries Policy Review, the Constitution Review Group and the Sea Trout Task Force (about which he playfully suggested he had his greatest diplomatic achievement: in securing a unanimous report). He held prestigious private sector directorates on the boards of the Bank of Ireland and Guinness.

As might be expected, the honours flowed in: President of the Royal Irish Academy, Chair of the Council of the Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies and President of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) – he had helped secure funding from the Ford Foundation for the establishment of the ESRI in 1960. He quipped that ‘an unpaid job is the hardest to resign from’.

His retirement, though crowded, allowed him time to indulge his passions for his family, fishing and music. He developed his playing skills, particularly on the cello. In 2014, approaching his ninety-eighth birthday, he charmed the audience at an event in his honour by playing the piano.

Whitaker had a long association with the IPA. Over the years, more than a dozen of his articles appeared in *Administration*. In 1983 the Institute published *Interests*, a collection of his essays and lectures. In 2006 the Institute published both *From Protection to Free Trade: The Final Battle*, an important record of the interdepartmental argument which preceded the move away from protectionism, and *Retrospect 2006–1916*, a personal memoir marking his ninetieth year. All were written in his characteristically lucid and jargon-free style. As co-chair of Anglo-Irish Encounter – which was established by both British and Irish governments to promote the exchange of cultural and social ideas

– he was a frequent visitor to the IPA, where the secretariat was based. In addition, in 2003 he graciously agreed to give his name to the Whitaker School of Government and Management, which brings together the IPA's education, research, publications and library activities. The Institute therefore naturally joins in the acknowledgement and celebration of his life and work.

T. K. Whitaker became acknowledged as a patriarch of Ireland's modernisation and a symbol of continuity as Ireland underwent decades of change. On a personal level, he was unfailingly polite, modest, without airs. He remained accessible to wider society and particularly to students and scholars, however junior. His conversation was filled with intelligence and good humour, often self-deprecating.

Not many civil servants become well-known beyond their departments. Whitaker became a historical national figure while still in post, and over the years his reputation grew. All the while, he remained grounded. With typical civil service reserve, his own summation was: 'I feel I made a contribution'.

T. K. Whitaker, 1916–2017
Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

M. M.