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Public sector reform in Ireland: Countering crisis

Muiris MacCarthaigh (London: Palgrave Macmillan; 2017; ISBN: 978-3-319574-59-2 hbk; 313 pp; €123.04)

This book presents two years of ‘fly on the wall’ insights into an examination of the single biggest cross-sectoral public sector reform initiative ever carried out in the Irish state. The analysis focuses on the role played in this process by the newly established Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER), from the perspective of those senior- and middle-ranking civil servants implementing the measures and largely ‘under the radar’ of daily political life. Arguing convincingly that analysis of the Irish state system is the neglected child of Irish government studies more generally, MacCarthaigh’s book is a welcome addition to the canon.

The book begins with a summary overview of Ireland’s (poor) record of political and administrative reform, using a couple of interesting tables to correlate the rate of creating public organisations with significant organisational change (p. 31), as well as the creation of new agencies and key reform events (p. 41). It is not easy to narrate a century of Irish governmental history in a single chapter but, for the uninitiated, this chapter manages to cover all the main issues without losing its primary focus on administrative reform: this is perhaps the one unforeseen advantage of Ireland’s ‘laggard’ international status in public service reform.

Chapter Three examines the creation of DPER and is particularly notable for detailing the practical legal, legislative and political issues that arose in its creation, including the constitutional constraints that shaped the available options and the political and administrative legwork necessary to ensure a smooth transition of responsibilities from the Department of Finance to the newly formed department. This really is a peek into the ‘black box’ of government, tracking fundamental changes to the system of Irish government in areas that seldom gain attention. Aside from the changes this necessitated to the

foundational Ministers and Secretaries Act of 1924 (p. 65), the reader is left with the impression of a strong, relatively autonomous state administrative system that is able to handle changes in political personnel with equanimity. The Department of Finance practice, for example, of a 'watching brief' over all opposition party manifestos to assess the extent to which different political ambitions might practically coalesce should those parties come to power (p. 61), plus regular briefings to opposition party leaders to keep them abreast of fiscal developments, together with informant quotes referring to managing 'first time Ministers' (p. 69), really reveal the 'wizards behind the curtain' pulling the levers that keep the governmental machine working.

Chapter Four examines the political opportunity structure that creating a new department in response to the financial crisis presented, developing Kingdon's (1995) idea of 'policy entrepreneurs' and highlighting the willingness of the new, externally appointed secretary general, Robert Watt, to play this role. On the one hand, the study illustrates how much can be achieved when there is a coincidence of strong political leadership working in harness with strong administrative direction. On the other hand, the reader is left wondering why this is such a rare occurrence as to be so notable here. Scope for another study perhaps?

Having dealt with the context, creation and internal organisation of DPÉR, the book, in Chapters Five and Six, fills out the empirical detail regarding the reform ambitions set for the new department and the negotiated bargain that was struck to achieve them. These chapters not only present a 'chronology of the crisis' as it unfolded in Ireland, but augment this with insider commentary so that the reader is made aware of what the crisis looked like 'from inside government' as well as without. For those interested in Irish politics or state responses to the Great Recession more generally, this meticulously researched, widely referenced and comprehensive detail is a gift to all scholars, and is set to become the reference text for years to come.

Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine, respectively, give detailed attention to the reform process in relation to public expenditure, organisational culture and wider political reform. In Chapter Seven the reader is oriented to the scale of the public spending reform challenge by noting that in the period 2008–15 fiscal adjustments were made to the tune of 20 per cent of GDP (p. 193). This chapter details the mechanics of governmental budgetary practice, before the crisis

and after. The historical predominance of government versus parliament and the traditional predilection for secrecy are brought into sharp relief when contrasted with new reform initiatives for increasing budgetary transparency and multi-year expenditure planning. Still, it concludes that even though these reforms represented the most significant change to Irish budgetary management since the foundation of the state, implementation of the new multi-year planning frameworks remains uneven and sometimes underutilised.

Chapter Eight gives detailed consideration to reform attempts to change the culture of the Irish civil service from a system that is not well integrated horizontally and somewhat closed to external opinion, to a more open system that is unified in vision and purpose. In a variety of examples throughout this chapter, we are reminded of the importance that political leadership and targeted change management have in pushing serious reform as opposed to engaging in superficial change. The role of the Taoiseach's office, and of the Taoiseach, in jointly promoting change initiatives is a notable element of the extent that DPER was able to shift organisational cultures. If we learn one thing in this book, it is that political champions are a necessary, though perhaps not sufficient, condition for meaningful political change. Chapter Nine gives insight into some of the other external conditions supporting change, namely the existence of a comprehensive reform agenda in other areas of government (FOI, lobby regulation, whistle-blowing, etc.), which helped to push 'system reform' as a key governmental ambition.

If earlier chapters presented the 'chronology of crisis', the concluding chapter is something of an epilogue, most notable for the insight that *achieving reform* is not as attractive to voters as *promising reform* (p. 256). It also does a nice job of rounding off the contribution that the book has made to different academic literatures identified at the outset. I did have a couple of quibbles with some of the political assertions in the book – the notion that Irish politics is centre-right seems an old trope that ignores the left leanings of Fianna Fáil and numerous independents and small parties over the years (Chapter 2); or the presumption that Irish politics is clientelist (Chapter 7), when it is more accurate to refer to the prevalence of brokerage in the Irish system – but these are only really included here to demonstrate that I was paying attention and that I can be critical. All in all, though a book on public sector reform in Ireland might not make the airport

bookshelves, I found it a pleasure to read. I cannot think that anyone else interested in analysing the Irish response to crisis would think otherwise.

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