

Administration, vol. 66, no. 4 (2018), pp. 93–98
doi: 10.2478/admin-2018-0034

Modes of politicization in the Irish civil service

Aodhán Mac Cormaic (London: Palgrave Macmillan; 2016; ISBN: 978-3-319332-81-9; 144 pp; €49.99)

The relationship between elected representatives and their civil servant ‘subjects’ has been a topic of interest for many years. This is evident from the lampooning it received in the popular 1980s BBC sitcom *Yes Minister* to more recent events such as the very public confrontations between the current US administration and public officials in the various federal government services. The politicisation of the top level of the civil service due to a change in relationship between ministers and civil servants has in recent times been a widely observed trend on a global scale. In this book Aodhán Mac Cormaic, a former civil servant, adds some insight into the relationship between cabinet-level ministers and top civil servants in an Irish context.

The main body of the text is divided into five chapters (excluding the introduction and conclusion chapters). Chapter Two comprises the research questions and design, Chapter Three discusses the theoretical perspectives and how they have applied to other systems, Chapter Four looks at the history of the politico-administrative system in Ireland, Chapter Five examines the evidence gathered by Mac Cormaic in his research, and Chapter Six ties all of the previous sections together by applying the theoretical perspectives to the Irish cases and data which were presented in Chapter Five.

The study undertaken is described as a ‘descripto-explanatory’ one. Mac Cormaic spends much of Chapter Two justifying the use of an interpretive approach rather than a positivist one. His chosen method of data collection – interviews with open-ended questions – allow for the differences in human actors and experiences to be expressed and recorded. The methodology is not without its downside, which the author readily admits. Due to both resource restrictions and general feasibility the sample only had sixteen participants – eight former

ministers and eight former secretary generals – who were chosen using connections rather than random sampling. This means that the study has no external validity, but Mac Cormaic states that the aim of this research is to reflect on experiences within this context, not to generalise.

The next chapter concerns the literature on the interactions between the ministers and their civil servants, and how this relationship can be politicised. Mac Cormaic looks at the three ‘traditional’ ways of interpreting this relationship – constitutional, rational choice and materialist – before going on to discuss two more recent approaches. First, however, he sets a parameter as to how top officials in the civil service are politicised. He starts by using Peters & Pierre’s (2004) definition of politicisation, where merit criteria for the selection, rewarding and disciplining of civil servants, which had become a hallmark of Weberian bureaucracy and the Haldane model used by countries of the Westminster/Whitehall tradition, are replaced by political criteria.

The constitutional interpretation of politicisation puts an emphasis on the particular changes in these settings as a means of politicising the civil service. The Westminster system of both the Northcote–Trevelyan report of 1854 and later Haldane report of 1918, which emphasise the ‘dichotomy’ of distinction between the short-term elected political masters and the long-term neutral civil service body, is said to have a huge influence on the apolitical nature of the civil service. It is purported that changes to the institutional setting, such as the growth of alternative information sources which grew with the ICT revolution and the shortening of tenure of top civil servants as a result of the New Public Management reforms, result in the politicisation of the top officials as they attempt to secure their place. The rational choice model sees everyone acting in their own interest where assisting in the minister’s self-interested goals may lead to benefiting an administrator’s own self-interest (power, prestige, budget-maximising). Mac Cormaic dismisses this rational choice theory as being based on some dubious, unrealistic assumptions, such as comprehensive knowledge of the issues being discussed. A similar response is given to materialism, where the civil service is seen as an undemocratic body which attempts to protect the class interests.

Instead of these ‘traditional’ ways of looking at the relationship, Mac Cormaic opts for two other possible theories. The interpretive approach looks at both institutional concepts and sociological concepts. In this thinking, it covers subjects such as structures and

traditions (like the Westminster tradition), as well as more individual factors such as agency and anomaly. Traditions are seen as particularly important (so long as they are consistent enough over long periods but still capable of evolving due to changes brought by dilemmas).

The other way of looking at the relationship suggested by Mac Cormaic is the Public Service Bargain (PSB) which was originally put forward by Schaffer (1973) and further developed by Hood & Lodge (2006). This assumes that there is a bargain where the civil service abstains from politics and gives neutral advice in exchange for security of tenure. Hood & Lodge split these bargains into two groups, trustee and agency, with the former showing the civil service as prosecutors of the public interest and the latter being derived from the 'principal/agent' theories which came to popularity in the 1970s. The trustee bargain sees the civil service as a necessary strong counterbalance without obligation to act within constitutional propriety, while the agency bargain does not. Other factors to the PSB framework are also explored, such as different types of rewards, competencies and loyalties which are hypothesised to have an impact on the bargain.

Mac Cormaic spends the remainder of the chapter reviewing the literature on the subject relating to the Westminster tradition countries of Australia, New Zealand and the UK. He points out that each of these three systems have some evidence of politicisation within them, usually through the control or potential control that elected officials have over the appointment of top civil servants. He points to previous studies which highlight examples such as the Australian prime minister's control over top civil servants, the increase in private individuals being brought into high-ranking positions in the British civil service since the Thatcher era, and the power of the New Zealand Government in the effective rubber-stamping of the appointment of high-ranking civil servants, despite the presence of an independent agency, due to the implicit threat of a rarely used veto power. These all point to Mac Cormaic's hypothesis that the neutral Westminster tradition, of which Ireland is a part, can and is becoming politicised.

In the fourth chapter we see the evolution of the Irish civil service and its relations to the political system. The assertion made is that, upon independence, Ireland did not just take the recently reformed modern view of the British civil service, as has often been assumed, but formed its own service from domestic chaos and vested interests. Mac Cormaic traces the evolution from a Wilsonian dichotomous civil service to the contemporary period, which is strongly influenced by

New Public Management and other management theories. He points to the Strategic Management Initiative and a range of legislative reforms implemented since the beginning of the 1980s which have promoted greater transparency (such as the Freedom of Information Act) as impacting the politicisation that has occurred in the Irish civil service. The social partnership arrangement (which was eventually brought to an end with the Croke Park and Haddington Road Agreements) also affected the development of a PSB, while greater transparency meant that civil servants were much less likely to dissent on the record as this could have negative impact on their ministers', and therefore their own, careers.

The author points to institutional boundaries brought in under the Public Service Management Act of 1997 and the Civil Service Regulation (Amendment) Act, 2005. These two pieces of legislation clarified the relationships between the minister and his departments along with what the minister and principal officers were authorised to do in terms of appointment, discipline and dismissal of those civil servants below them, but the role in appointment of principal officers appears to be the focus of this chapter. A considerable amount of time is spent on the subject of the Top Level Appointments Committee (TLAC). Originally, appointments were made on the minister's suggestion, but in 1984 the TLAC was created, which was formed from a committee of mostly secretaries general, and allowed open competition. Further reforms of this process in 2010–11 led to an increase of private industry individuals being appointed to the committee and being awarded positions. Mac Cormaic suggests that there is a lack of transparency, however, in the later stages of the TLAC process, giving plenty of wiggle room for politicisation, and he points to the fact that any political intervention, even if nothing to do with partisan politics, can lead to the 'can do' official. Mac Cormaic claims that it is the growth of 'can do' attitudes of officials which is the subtler and more pervasive form of politicisation affecting the Irish civil service.

The fifth chapter looks at the data which were collected for the study. Mac Cormaic found evidence of strong themes. The strongest evidence presented was that officials would excessively appease ministers, usually by limiting policy analysis to accommodate political considerations. A second, linked theme which was mentioned by thirteen of the respondents was an indication that dissenting opinions were suppressed at some level in the civil service. This would take the form of either self-censorship or censorship of subordinates. The

evidence suggests that those who do not appease their ministers were bypassed or transferred, or suffered career-wise as a result, as well as being sidelined not just by the ministers but by the civil servants themselves. This is further supported by the albeit weaker evidence that civil servants conceded to ministers in order to have a smoother-running department. All of this is supported by the fact that the minister's approval of an official to their position still carries influence in the TLAC appointments, as well as the suggestion that the TLAC is an institution which tries to perpetuate the status quo.

Chapter Six brings all the previous chapters together. Mac Cormaic concludes that there is evidence of a PSB involving both a trustee and an agent bargain. He claims that a multiple principal/multiple agent dynamic is present in the creation of this trustee/agency PSB. He points to the different rewards systems in place as well as to the types of loyalty and competency aspects of the bargain, which are supported by evidence. Another factor that Mac Cormaic mentions here is the potential influence of the longevity of the government on politicisation.

Mac Cormaic also assesses the data from an interpretive approach, answering four questions he believed relevant. His conclusion from an interpretive perspective is that there is a new narrative where civil servants and politicians are *de facto* working with each other. The data also suggest there remains a Haldane/Westminster narrative – this tradition is ever-evolving with each dilemma it faces. Data were less conclusive on perceived outcomes of attempts to appease ministers: some believed that appeasement would improve chances of promotion and that ministers actively cultivated 'yes men', while others did not. Either way, the author determines that tradition has maintained a high level of consistency which has resulted in the *de facto* approval of the hiring minister being chosen when the new appointment system reached a dilemma. This rubber-stamping has become a new tradition with the potential to impact policy development as it may promote the silencing of dissenting voices.

Mac Cormaic concludes that there is, in fact, plenty of evidence to support the claim that the Irish civil service has been politicised. He goes on to state that, due to the open nature of the questions, evidence of new categories not found in the literature review, and subsequently not enquired about in most of the interviews, was found. He suggests that future research should be conducted into these types of politicisation, government longevity, public accountability, instances of dissenting with the minister, and inverse direct politicisation

(punishment of those who have different political views).

The conclusion, which as the author readily admits has no statistical generalisability, is that the Irish civil service has become more politicised. Using evidence gathered from interviews with a select group of retired civil servants and ministers the author shows that, using either the interpretive or the PSB framework for looking at the relationship, a relationship dynamic has arisen where the top-ranking civil servants and their cabinet ministers are working together in a de facto relationship to maintain the status quo.

Mac Cormaic succeeds in giving a general insight into the question at hand. The book provides a good overview of the subject matter as well as some new qualitative analysis of the theories in an Irish context. It makes good reading for any student of public administration and generalists alike. This is partly due to the range of theories and examples covered and partly due to the clarity in which it is presented. It is methodological, almost to a fault, with each chapter containing its own abstract, introduction and conclusion. Everything is thoroughly classified, with sections and subsections going so far as to have four layers. While it is far from light bedtime reading it achieves its goal of giving a comprehensive insight into the important subject at hand.

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