

McGill Summer School and Arts Week 2004

**POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY IN IRELAND IN THE
21ST CENTURY**

DECENTRALISATION - CAN IT WORK?

Address by AHCPS General Secretary, Seán Ó Riordáin

It might be useful to begin by identifying the stakeholders. These are many and various. They include local communities, local business interests, central government, public servants who wish to relocate, public servants who do not wish or are unable, for family or other reasons, to relocate; and then there is the public.

Can Decentralisation Work?

The big question must be in whose interest should it work and the answer must be – in the public interest: and I would like to give you an AHCPS perspective on this.

Our Association represents some 3,200 members in the civil service and in state agencies. Like all trade unions we are concerned with the terms and conditions of employment and with the welfare of our members; but we are also hugely concerned with effective delivery of government services to the public whom we serve. Indeed, we called for strategic change in the coordination and management of government business long before SMI took off, and our contribution to public service reform has been welcomed and praised by successive Taoisigh.

The proposed decentralisation of 10,300 public servants is the most fundamental change in public administration since the foundation of the state. When it was originally mooted in the Budget 2000 we wrote to the Department of Finance stressing the need for

meaningful advance discussions with ourselves and other civil service unions; the imperative that relocation should be voluntary; that it should add to rather than take from administrative efficiency; the need to ensure that the choice of locations would be on a rational public interest basis, rather than the traditional party political model. Along with the other civil service unions, we asked for a survey of staff interest before any final decisions were taken and for the huge HR/IR issues to be addressed.

We confirmed that the Association had no objection to decentralisation. The Association has always fully recognised the real advantage both for local communities and for public service staff of a carefully planned and well-executed relocation programme and we have no wish to impede such a process. Here in Donegal, the decentralised Social, Community & Family Affairs is an excellent example.

Finally, we stated our belief that the combination of national interest, the requirements of administrative efficiency, and a recognition of legitimate interests of both public servants and local communities all highlighted the need to proceed on a reflective and consultative basis and we called for the publication of a Green Paper discussion document to enable this wide range of important issues to be debated before any final decisions would be taken by Government.

We all know what happened

The Government's plan to decentralise 10,300 public servants jobs to 53 locations in 26 counties was announced in the 2004 Budget Statement. Between government departments, sub sections of departments, and state agencies, 70 organisations in all are to be relocated. The Office of Public Works and 8 Departments are to move in total. The announcement was made without any further consultation with the unions; without any survey and, apparently, without the normal governmental processes being gone through.

The Association engaged in intensive consultation with members and branches over a three month period leading to the publication at our Special Delegate Conference on 1

March of a considered assessment of decentralisation under the title “*Public Service Relocation Programme: An opportunity missed and a challenge to meet*”.

The Association's assessment contains three messages:

- (1) it confirms that the AHCPS fully supports a voluntary and rational model of decentralisation which enhances effectiveness in public administration and which respects the legitimate industrial relations and human resources implications for public servants;
- (2) it articulates very serious concerns at the effects of a forced fragmentation and dispersal of central government functions on policy formulation at departmental, ministerial, national and international levels, on cohesive and coordinated government, on administrative efficiency, on national spatial strategy and on service delivery to the public; and
- (3) it outlines a rational and reasonable approach to decentralisation which includes a cost and impact analysis, an altered scope and time scale and a more consultative and partnership approach with trade unions.

The March Conference unanimously endorsed a resolution by the Executive Committee calling on Government to draw up and publish detailed costings and impact analysis; to reconsider the scope and time frame of decentralisation (we proposed a 10 to 15 year time frame); to make additional resources available; to delay the decentralisation of core IT functions until there was certainty about continued delivery of IT services; and to negotiate a new HR policy which would respect legitimate career aspirations and not create a public service wasteland in Dublin. Conference also called on the Association to publicise our concerns nation wide and to pursue the matter at political level and with the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Finance and Services.

Our subsequent Annual Delegate Conference in May and had the benefit of an address by Dr. Edward Walsh, President Emeritus, University of Limerick at which he expanded, from his own wide ranging sources, the reservations articulated by the Association, and he indicated that what was proposed was contrary to best international practice. I also made available at conference material received under the Freedom of Information Act which showed that there were fundamental reservations formally expressed by some

heads of departments, when they were initially consulted in 2000, at the fragmentation of services and the possible relocation of core policy functions out of Dublin.

At the heart of the Strategic Management Initiative is the need to create better cohesive joined up government and policy making across the range of government activities rather than having each Department behave as an independent republic. There is, in our view, absolutely no question but that the wide dispersal of central policy functions throughout the country makes cohesive joined up government more difficult. Nationally and internationally, dispersal makes policy determination and coordination more difficult for Ministers, for Government, departments and for civil servants and we do not believe that video conferencing (even if technically feasible throughout the country) will solve it.

The dispersal of policy functions is not, however, just a problem for the effective discharge by Ministers and officials of their responsibilities. It also fundamentally affects the public in that national organisations, representative groups and members of the public who need to talk to the policy makers – and policy ultimately decides who gets the money – will have to travel the length and breadth of Ireland to do so. For example, Kilybegs fishermen will now have to travel to Clonakilty if they want to talk about sea fisheries policy to the relevant officials in the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources. Community groups from all over the country wishing to meet the relevant officials in Community Rural And Gaeltacht Affairs will now have to go to Knock Airport; if they want to discuss aspects of the same problem with Environment and Education, they will have to travel to Wexford and Mullingar and if people want to talk to the policy makers in Arts, Sports and Tourism they will all have to travel to the kingdom of Kerry.

There are also individual offices and agencies where, by virtue of the location of the principal client group, the logic of relocation is at issue. For example, the core client groups of the Equality Tribunal and the Equality Agency are Dublin based and the logic of everybody trooping down to Portllington and Roscrea to the agencies just does not make sense. The Prison Service at present is located in Clondalkin close to Wheatfield

and Cloverhill Prisons; Mountjoy is down the road and Midland Prison and Portlaoise is readily accessible. Our members are asking what the business case is for moving the Prison Service to Longford, where the only adjacent prison is Castlerea. They are asking what the business case is for moving the Development Aid Section of the Department of Foreign Affairs (Development Cooperation Ireland) to Limerick: their principal client groups are the embassies and non-governmental organisations in Dublin, and we understand that Dochas, the umbrella organisation for the NGO's, moved recently to Harcourt Street to be near Foreign Affairs.

Turning finally to the people issue – and leaving aside both the hopes of public servants wishing to move and the seething anger felt and the uncertainty it has created for thousands of public servants and their families in Dublin – the preliminary CAF figures are worse than we had anticipated. In January I expressed the view that applicants in Dublin wishing to relocate to the 53 locations might overall, between the civil service and state agencies, be at the 33.1/3 – 50 % level: in practice it is less than 30%. In the state agencies it is even worse.

We have also consistently been saying that we did not expect more than 20% of staff in organisations to move with their jobs down the country; in fact, only 6% overall [civil service and state agencies] and 7.5% [471 out of 6,277] in the civil service are prepared to move. Indeed these figures need to be qualified: they may not be in the grades needed and they may not be doing the actual work due to be relocated.

On average, therefore, if this programme were to be completed by 2007, it would be necessary to transfer out over 92.5% of staff in 42 civil service organisations and find over 92.5% of new staff somewhere else – if they were available – to transfer in, train and move down the country. The mind boggles.

To take some examples:

- • Communications Marine and Natural Resources is to go to Cavan (378 jobs) and Clonakilty (90 jobs); Only 11 of the Department's Dublin staff want to go to Cavan and 12 to Clonakilty;
- • Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs is to go to Knock Airport (160 jobs); only 5 of the Department's Dublin staff want to go;
- • Education & Science is to go to Mullingar (292 jobs) and Athlone (108 jobs); Only 21 of the Department's Dublin staff want to go to Mullingar and 3 to Athlone;
- • Youghal is to get the Civil Service Commission and the Valuation Office (199 jobs); only 3 in total of staff working in these organisations in Dublin want to go to Youghal;
- • The Equality Tribunal is to go to Portlinton (29 jobs) and the Equality Agency is to go to Roscrea (53). Nobody wants to go from either office;
- • Environment Heritage & Local Government is to go to Kilkenny (62 jobs), New Ross (125 jobs) Waterford (225 jobs) and Wexford (249 jobs); None of the Department's staff in Dublin want to go to Kilkenny; 1 wants to go to New Ross, 5 want to go to Waterford and 8 to Wexford. In all 661 to go and only 14 applicants from the Department in Dublin;
- • Agriculture & Food is to go to Portlaoise (380 jobs); only 16 of the Department's Dublin staff want to go;
- • Arts Sports & Tourism (137 jobs) is to go to Killarney; only 8 of the Department's Dublin staff want to go; and
- • the final example - the Office of Public Works; only one of the Dublin staff wish to go to Kanturk to which 88 jobs are to transfer.

Other Unions are echoing similar concerns. The Transport Salaried Staff Association has cited the case of Bus Eireann going to Michelstown. Peter Nolan, the National Secretary of IMPACT has already highlighted problems in the professional and technical areas, with, for example, the Probation and Welfare Service (102 jobs) going to Navan but only one person prepared to move.

It may be that there will be some increase when the final CAF results come out in September, but even a three fold increase in the numbers within Departments and Agencies in Dublin willing to move down the country will still create an impossible task in terms of the ordinary management of the public service with decentralisation proceeding within the time frame originally envisaged by Government. Of course, a substantial number of existing decentralised staff wish to move elsewhere down the country, but this will only add to the churning effect. There are not, remotely, sufficient Dublin staff prepared to replace public servants in existing decentralised locations.

I have only touched here today briefly on some of the major issues surrounding the question of whether decentralisation can work. There are other issues of a management nature, corporate memory loss, skills replacement etc. There are a whole range of public interest issues in terms of cost; impact analysis, affects on local communities; on regional strategy; impact for provision of schools (The INTO, General Secretary John Carr recently sounded warnings about pressure on local school places), local house prices, and rural health services, etc. I have not even spoken about the pre-eminent human resources/ industrial relations issues which have yet to be addressed, - and of course, decentralisation is about people not buildings - but I would suggest that anybody who wishes to seriously consider decentralisation might like to read our publication *Public Service Relocation Programme: An opportunity missed and a challenge to meet* which is available on our website at www.ahcps.ie

The focus tonight is on decentralisation, but the broad theme of the Summer School is on Politics and Democracy in Ireland in the 21st Century. Ultimately, democracy is about how we are ruled and how the sovereignty of the people prevails. Dicey, the great British constitutional authority of the last century, distinguished, in his seminal work on the Law of the Constitution, between strict laws incorporated in statute (and, in our case, the written constitution) and what he called the Conventions of the Constitution which are made up of understandings and customs which protect the public interest.

