

SPECIAL DELEGATE CONFERENCE ON DECENTRALISATION

Speech by AHCPS Chairperson Sean McDonald

Before we get into the formal business of this Special Delegate Conference we have, as many of you will be aware, in recent months sadly bade a final farewell to Jim Mooney who was Honorary President of this Association to which we had given many years service. We have also witnessed the untimely death of our colleague, Barry O'Hara, from the Department of Justice. So in memory of Jim and Barry let us begin these proceedings with a minute's silence.

As to the agenda and theme of today's conference we are all too aware of the reason for our being here. We have a substantial number of motions before us together with a comprehensive motion from the Executive.

I believe that it is only necessary for me to briefly make a few points before giving the floor to Seán Ó Riordán who will present the Executive Committee report which was drawn up with the assistance of Mr. Brian Barry of Burnham House Management Consultants. I hope you will all find that this report speaks clearly both to the concerns and the issues before us.

As you know and as is once again clearly stated in the report to this meeting the Association has no objection to the principle of re-location. We have however also clearly stated our belief that the combination of national interest, the requirements of administrative efficiency and a recognition of the legitimate interests of both public servants and local communities, all highlighted the need to proceed on a reflective and consultative basis.

As is well known we have played an active part in line with our declared policy in the re-location of functions of the Civil and Public Service throughout the last decade. In these circumstances we feel it fair to say that no one should narrowly look at the Minister's proposal from the limited perspective of its effect solely on Civil and Public Servants. Our message today is that this is a much bigger issue and one which deserves to be addressed as being of national importance. People outside of this meeting might ask why we say this. The simple answer is that our role in senior management in the Civil and Public Service gives us some considerable insight into the workings and needs of the machinery of Government in Ireland.

Accordingly we feel that this big bang approach could have unforeseen negative consequences and we feel duty bound to ask questions. Our report raises these.

Of course a proposal of this kind must, by its nature, impact on people. However on this occasion it was hard not to feel from the manner of its presentation that this re-location was more about politics than people.

To quote from the report before you - the programme announced on 3 December last is not simply about "Public Service jobs: It is about Civil and Public Servants, their work environment, their career development and their spouses, partners, children and dependants.

We will no doubt discuss these questions and all other related questions in the course of the day ahead and indeed well beyond that.

We are all aware that most countries have designated administrative capitals in order to bring together in one place the policy making functions of government. It would appear from the programme for re-location that in future Ireland will have these functions dispersed to a variety of locations around the country. An exercise of this kind was already tried by the Dutch, in a country which is often described as being the size of Munster but which has a more developed infrastructure. It didn't work and they found it necessary to regroup policy making functions in the Hague. At present in Germany they are encountering difficulties by virtue of the fact that not all functions have been re-centralised following the return to Berlin. Perhaps I'm wrong but there might be a valuable analysis to be made on the strength of the Dutch and German experience.

Let me conclude these introductory remarks with my thanks to the members of the Executive for the time and the work which they have put into the preparation of this Conference. I would also like, on your behalf, to thank Sean, Dave, John, Jackie and Gillian for their hard work. Finally, I would also like to express appreciation to our Honorary Vice Presidents, Tom Quigley and Jimmy Murphy, for stepping into the breach and helping the staff at HQ to organise today's meeting.

Now I will give the floor to our General Secretary.

End.