Association of Higher Civil & Public Servants

Comhlachas na Seirbhíseach Uachtarach Stáit agus Poiblí

AHCPS

30 June 2000

Mr Tom Considine
Secretary General
Public Service Management & Development
Department of Finance

Dear Tom

I am writing, following the meeting this morning, to put on the record the Association's views on decentralisation.

There is very great concern throughout the Association about the implications, for our members and for the effective administration of Government, of the proposals for massive decentralisation of the civil and public service. This concern has been reflected in our discussions at branch and at Executive Committee levels and in the debate which took place on the substantial number of motions on decentralisation [copies attached] adopted at our Annual Delegate Conference in May.

The Association's approach is very simple and straightforward. Decentralisation, in our view, should only proceed after meaningful advance consultation with the unions, and then on a basis which is rational and voluntary and which addresses the legitimate concerns of our members as expressed in the ADC motions. The Association represents key management grades at Principal and Assistant Principal level. These are at the heart of Government and, while sharing the trade union concerns of other unions, the reality is that our grades will primarily have to bear the brunt of administrative and other problems that will fall out from any unwise decentralisation.

The Association believes that at the heart of any rational policy on decentralisation is the requirement that the economic and social basis on which individual locations are chosen is clearly spelt out and debated publicly before final decisions are taken. To put it bluntly, the traditional practice of transferring sections of Departments to the local constituency of the Minister or Minister of State with functional responsibility in the area has given rise, as I have publicly said previously, to the perception of *"civil servants being handed out like smarties in pursuit of local electoral advantage"*. On this occasion, we believe that there should be sustainable objective criteria and assessment of both the positive and negative implications arising nationally and for local communities.

Decentralisation must also make sense from an administrative perspective. There should be a published administrative assessment of the implications, from a policy

Seán Ó Ríordáin General Secretary

4 Warner's Lane
Dartmouth Road
Dublin 6

Tel. 01 668 6064
01 668 6077
Fax. 01 668 6380

Email. info@ahcps.ie
Web. http://www.ahcps.ie

rmulation and management and from a customer service perspective, of the effects of proposed decentralisation on administrative efficiency in Departments. This is important generally, but the more so in the case of Departments which are substantially fragmented and decentralised already. We are particularly conscious in this regard of the responsibilities of Secretaries General under the Public Service Management Act for the effective administration of Departments and we believe that a rational approach to decentralisation would necessarily involve the publication of their assessments of how proposals might impact on administrative efficiency. You will appreciate that it is much too simple to assume that the existence of enhanced telecommunications alone will overcome all difficulties. The prospect of widespread fragmented administration, with each decentralised office creating it's own separate and independent organisation culture, the implications for staffing and career prospects and the comparative costs should all be assessed and taken into account.

The Association believes that there must be meaningful advance consultations with the unions before final decisions are taken. The choice of location will have very significant impact both on administrative efficiency and on the number of volunteers who will apply for decentralisation. The manner in which decentralisation is progressed must, in a career structure like the civil service, have regard to promotion issues which arise both in decentralised and in Head Offices. There is, additionally, as set out in the ADC Motions, the need to positively address the financially related issues which arise such as the payment of removal expenses and the provision of compensation in relation to loss of promotion opportunities, and we have quoted recent precedent to you in this regard.

The Association, as you know, has no objection whatsoever in principle to decentralisation, but we believe that the combination of the national interest, the requirements of administrative efficiency and a recognition of the legitimate interests of civil servants all point towards the desirability of proceeding on the rational basis which we have proposed. Given the massive scale of decentralisation and its overall national importance, we would see the benefit of publishing a Green Paper Discussion Document to enable the wide range of issues to be publicly debated before final decisions are taken by Government

The Association welcomes the fact that the Minister for Finance will meet the civil service union General Secretaries next week to discuss decentralisation, and I look forward to this.

Yours sincerely

Sean O Riordain
General Secretary

Composite A
That this ADC

1. expresses very serious concerns at the arbitrary nature of recent Government decisions on decentralisation, announced without any meaningful advance consultation with civil service unions, and

2. directs the Executive Committee to pursue the matter with Government, in consultation with other unions, with a view to ensuring that decentralisation proceeds on a rational and voluntary basis which has proper regard to legitimate interests of civil servant staff, including the need for a reasonable level of compensation in respect of the expenses and disruption involved in a move to a new location.

Executive Committee

27. That this ADC reaffirms its support for the policy of transferring civil servants on a voluntary basis to offices outside the Dublin area and directs the Executive Committee to secure confirmation from the Government that transfers will continue to be effected on this basis.

Marine & Natural Resources

28. That Conference instructs the incoming Executive to ensure that the decentralisation of civil and public service staff should continue to be voluntary and if it occurs, that re-location expenses should be made available.

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29. That Conference demands that the principle of voluntary relocation should be adhered to under the decentralisation programme announced recently by Government, that implementation should have due regard to the need for efficiency, effectiveness and quality of service and that before final decisions are taken on the proposed numbers and locations, full consultation should take place with the relevant staff associations.

Agriculture, Food & Rural Development

30. That Conference instructs the incoming Executive Committee to explore ways of ensuring that the impact both on the responsibilities and career prospects of members as a result of the regionalisation of the civil service arising from decentralisation be compensated appropriately.

Agriculture. Food & Rural Development

31. That Conference instructs the incoming Executive Committee to inform the Government, as a matter of urgency, that any proposal which would provide for the involuntary transfer of members with their employing Department/Office in the context of the decentralisation programme, would be unacceptable to the Association.

Office of the Ombudsman

32. That Conference instructs the incoming Executive Committee to deplore the action of the Government and individual Ministers/Ministers of State who seek to transfer Government Departments or Bodies under the aegis of Government Departments, to locations around the country for purely party political, or personal political, gain, and without any reference to the possible implications in terms of the economy, efficiency and effectiveness on the delivery of services, or to the concept of spatial planning as proposed in the National Development Plan.

Tourism, Sport & Recreation

33. That Conference notes the Government's plans to:

(1) Decentralise large numbers of civil servants to areas outside of Dublin

(2) Strengthen local Government structures,

conference instructs the incoming Executive Committee to examine these issues and report to the membership by mid-2000 with a view to protecting members promotional opportunities in the context of a much reduced civil service presence in the Dublin region.

Tourism, Sport & Recreation

34. That conference instruct the Executive Committee to continue to ensure that members of this Association are relocated only on a voluntary basis when Departments or Offices are relocated as part of the government's decentralisation programme.

Justice Equality & Law Reform

35. In the light of recent unilateral announcements by the government on the proposed decentralisation of large numbers of civil servants, this Conference re-affirms AHCPS policy that any scheme of decentralisation must,

(a) be of a voluntary nature

(b) be the subject of consultations and agreement in the spirit of partnership, and

(c) involve a reasonable level of compensation in respect of the expenses and disruption involved in a move to a new location.

Social Community & Family Affairs

36. That this ADC

(1) Expresses very serious concerns at the arbitrary nature of recent government decisions on decentralisation, announced without any meaningful advance consultations with civil service unions, and

(2) Directs the Executive Committee to pursue the matter with Government, in consultation with other unions, with a view to ensuring that decentralisation proceeds on a rational and voluntary basis, which has proper regard to the legitimate interests of civil service staff.

Executive Committee

37. That Conference instruct the incoming Executive Committee to examine the potential for, and implications of, combining the civil service and local Government recruitment pools in light of Decentralisation and local Government Reform, and the Association's on-going support for the improvement of public services.

Tourism, Sport & Recreation