

Frank Independent Sat 2 Aug 2014

The greying of the civil service is now a ticking timebomb

MUCH of the work of the civil service, while critically important, is not always in the public eye.

These civil servants are the men and women who help to keep the state functioning. They collect the taxes that fund vital services. They help administer our system of justice. They help ensure our social welfare system works efficiently. They engage with other administrations on our behalf. And so much more.

In recent years these key functions have been under considerable strain. The daily wear and tear is apparent. However there is a longer term problem that arguably poses a greater threat to the long term viability of the provision of services. To date it is a silent problem, largely ignored by political decision makers. But it is a problem that is quietly ticking away, and, as time passes the ticking is growing progressively



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louder. The ticking in question is emanating from the age timebomb that is currently sitting under the foundations of our civil service. Simply put our civil service is getting older, inputs of new blood have been stunted and there are no solutions in sight.

If this corrosion is allowed to continue the system will fail - and our citizenry, who depend on these key functions, will ultimately be the losers.

Many may disregard this as a non-issue, but as the age timebomb ticks on it is anticipated that 46pc of senior managers in the civil service will reach the age of 65 and retire in the next ten years.

This will mean a very significant loss of experience, a loss of skills and a loss of organisational know-how. Institutional knowledge of this nature is important capital in the management of our state. Discarding this capital unreplaced is simply foolhardy.

Cutbacks and recruitment embargoes put in place in 2009 have left us in the onerous situation whereby 65pc of staff in the civil service are now between the ages of 40 and 60.

In 2012, 45pc of civil service employees were over the age of 50. Assuming a retirement age of 65 and no additional recruitment, 66pc of civil servants will be over 50 in 10 years' time.

This situation is exacerbated by the fact that a high number of staff are likely to retire from critical positions in the near future.

Indeed, over the next 10 years, 71pc of senior managers will reach the age of 60, with many eligible to retire, while 46pc will reach 65, meaning they must retire.

The looming retirement of these employees and a fatally lagging recruitment process means that there will likely be extensive promotions within organisations, with the possibility of staff being promoted who could lack suitable skills.

At some stage the system becomes simply unworkable
In 1985 the average age in the civil service was 34. By 2004 it was 41. By 2012 it was 46. Just 4pc of civil service employees were under 30 by 2012. At some point, unless recruitment is boosted and the sector made more attractive to applicants, the system of administration becomes simply unworkable.

Put simply the system is running on empty. Time is running out - and decision makers need to wake up. We need the resources to put in place effective workplace planning

systems that allow organisations to prepare for the future needs of our state. We must address the human capital challenge and fill positions with the right candidates. This is not merely about 'creating jobs', though that is welcome.

We need to make these high-level positions more appealing and we need to do it now. We need a new recruitment process and to allow young people access all areas of the civil service. We need to develop and train talent adequately at all levels.

If decision makers are to take the longer view they will see that the age crisis in the service actually represents a generational opportunity to properly plan for the future, to allocate a new and diverse range of talented people into these important positions - positions that are vital for to our society and to sustaining economic recovery.

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