

Chapter 7

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Media advisers and programme managers

On 29 September 2008, in a process shrouded in secrecy, the Irish government issued an unlimited bank guarantee to six banks. This would ultimately cost the Irish taxpayer billions of euro. Two years later, on 21 November 2010, Taoiseach Brian Cowen formally requested financial assistance for Ireland through the European Union's economic financial stability facility (EFSF) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). One week later, the government, the European Union and the IMF agreed to an €85 billion rescue deal, the EU – IMF bailout package. On that day, 88 years after the foundation of the state, Ireland relinquished its fiscal and budgetary sovereignty.

From that moment, Ireland entered one of the most prolonged and fraught crises of its political, fiscal and social history. This chapter explores the communications role of politically appointed Irish government media advisers during this period of unprecedented national crisis from 2010 until 2012. This period encompasses a change of government in Ireland and the chapter includes a comparative analysis of the role of media advisers during the Fianna Fáil led government under Brian Cowen and the subsequent Fine Gael led government under Enda Kenny. The findings in relation to the status and role, value for money and ethical probity (in relation to the public interest) contained in this chapter are based on two sets of interviews conducted with Irish political correspondents in 2010 and 2013. In all, 15 political correspondents were interviewed – out of a total number of 46 in the Oireachtas press gallery. The interviews were conducted on the basis of anonymity. A variety of journalists were selected for interview with a mix of male and female interviewees

working for both tabloid and broadsheet print media, along with correspondents (radio and television) from commercial and public sector broadcasters. In 2010, 11 out of a possible 13 politically appointed media advisers were also interviewed on the basis of anonymity.

Media advisors and programme managers

Politically appointed media advisers and programme managers made their first appearance on the Irish political landscape in 1993 when several such positions were created by members of the incoming Fianna Fáil – Labour Party coalition. Reporting at the time, Geraldine Kennedy (1993a), public affairs correspondent of the *Irish Times* noted, ‘(T)he majority of Ministers have appointed their new partnership programme managers, a new layer of advisers charged with the specific task of monitoring, implementing and coordinating work on the implementation of the programme for government in a continental-type *cabinet* system.’

Kennedy also observed that whilst Fianna Fáil ministers ‘by and large are appointing civil servants to the posts’, Labour ministers ‘seem to be appointing outside advisors.’ Kennedy’s article lists ten such appointments. However, shortly afterwards, Kennedy (1993b) reported that the number of politically appointed staff had grown to 135 and raised concerns about the number of family members being appointed to the posts. She observed that in salaries alone, such appointments would cost over £3 million per annum. Concerns raised about the nomination of family members to such posts – many without ‘formal job descriptions’ – raised the issue of political cronyism. Funded exclusively by the exchequer, these posts were subsequently formalised by legislation. Politically appointed media advisers and programme managers are now employed under Section 11 (1) of the Public Service Management Act 1997. Twenty years after their first appearance on the Irish political scene, it is appropriate to examine the status and role of contemporary politically appointed advisers with specific reference to the cost and ethical considerations associated with such appointments – most

especially because their government policy is not generally understood due to a lack of transparency in the spheres of public affairs and lobbying within Ireland.

The political economy of communication explores the power relationships between print and electronic media organisations – traditional and digital alike – and other elite institutions within society. The most prominent power brokers recurrently examined include the executive, or government of the day, institutions of state, political parties and powerful business interests. Indeed, in recurring analyses of public communication within the political economy approach, government is consistently identified as a major player in negotiating the range and scope of national discourses and narratives. The literature (Schiller, 1992; Mosco, 1996; Mc Chesney, et al., 1998) suggests that powerful actors, such as government, invest their energies in seeking to shape a ‘compliant’ print and electronic media that will, ideally, constantly reiterate its views and positions.

Therefore, an entity as powerful as government, with constant and privileged access to what media professionals consider premium news content is ideally placed to maximise a potentially mutually beneficial relationship with the media. Most government ministers and their media advisors enjoy privileged access to day-to-day departmental policy and operating issues that, by their very nature, are high in news value and often at the top of the news agenda. Media advisors regularly identify and target relevant media professionals and furnish them with an ample supply of authoritative news copy – on or off the record. In the case of each government department or ministerial portfolio, the relevant media correspondents and key opinion makers are targeted for supply with details of current policy initiatives at home and abroad. Providing journalists information about issues high in news value in this way might assist the government of the day in its efforts to achieve ‘primary definition’ in relation

to its policies. It might also function to divert media attention from peripheral and often negative issues affecting the government. It is arguable that successive recent Irish governments have shown themselves to be especially keen to control or influence public narratives around the ethical orientation and economic metrics of current fiscal and austerity policies.

Such a process, according to Hall (1978, 59), ‘places the media in a position of structured subordination to the primary definers’. In this scenario, the media, by being overly-reliant on the information provided by official sources assume a ‘secondary role in reproducing the definitions of those who have privileged access.’ This is especially so in an era of digital communication with increased pressure on media professionals to satisfy news deadlines in a highly competitive and time-sensitive environment. In other words, the operating environment within which media professionals now find themselves – with increased competition for access to privileged sources – functions to subordinate the media’s role as primary definers. Commentators such as Keeble (2000, 43–44) further emphasise the negative aspects of this dynamic:

At the heart of journalism lies the source. Becoming a journalist to a great extent means developing sources. As a journalist you need to know a lot: where to go for information and who to ask. And for career development, contacts are crucial . . .

Media research suggests journalists use a remarkably limited range of sources.

Journalists dependent on a limited number of privileged sources and operating in a time-pressured environment would appear to place them in an unequal power relationship with in-house sources, spokespersons and public relations practitioners engaged by politicians. In the

1990s the levels of primary definition being achieved by government agencies and spokespersons in the west led some commentators such as Kellner (2001, 199–200) to describe the media as simply ‘conduits for government policies and actions’. Given that the number and financial cost of politically appointed media advisers within Ireland is relatively high, their role in managing state-media relations deserves critical scrutiny.

Media advisers and the Cowen-led Fianna Fáil administration

On RTÉ television’s ‘The Week in Politics’, on 14 November 2010, Fianna Fáil minister, Dermot Ahern described as ‘fiction’ international media speculation that Ireland was about to enter a bailout programme. Ahern, an insider at the heart of the government, stated that ‘[t]here are no negotiations going on . . . We have not applied.’ One week later, Taoiseach Brian Cowen formally applied for financial assistance from the ESFS and the IMF. Ahern’s performance on ‘The Week in Politics’ seemed emblematic of the communications style of Cowen’s government – patronising, arrogant and misleading. Some months later, the minister for finance, Brian Lenihan (*The Journal*, 2011) stated that all ministers had been aware of the talks but that to admit the discussions were ongoing might have damaged Ireland’s standing in the money markets. Within a year of the collapse of the Fianna Fáil led administration, the communications profile of Cowen’s government was neatly summed up by the business editor of the *Irish Independent*, Maeve Dineen (2011): ‘The last crowd gabbed all the time and often ended up lying, as they did over the bailout talks, with the result that they left office with no credibility at all.’

As Cowen’s administration lurched from crisis to crisis during the closing months of its term in office there was a growing consensus among politicians, journalists and public affairs analysts alike that the government’s media relations and communications style was going

from bad to worse (O'Brien, 2009). In fact, notwithstanding the central issue of Ireland's unprecedented fiscal crisis, the communications style of Cowen's government had become a major news story – in and of itself. In March 2009, a satirical painting of a semi-nude Cowen was brought to the attention of the public by journalist Ken Foxe of the *Sunday Tribune*. The painting had been left on display in the National Gallery and the Royal Hibernian Academy. The matter received further national attention when RTÉ news broadcast images of the painting which featured a seated Taoiseach holding a pair of blue and white underwear in his left hand.

However, the story went international after RTÉ broadcast an apology the following evening. In the days that followed, An Garda Síochána also became involved: after an on-air discussion of the issue on Today FM's 'Ray D'Arcy Show', the radio station was visited by members of the force. It was widely reported that the gardaí visited the radio station in Dublin's city centre at the behest of 'the powers that be' (Cooper, 2009). What should have been a storm in a teacup in any mature parliamentary democracy – where political and artistic satire are accepted as normal, even civilised – government mishandling of the incident ensured that it became a major international news story. The sorry saga was re-told across the world from the BBC and the *Times* in London to Fox News and the *New York Times* in the US. It even made headlines in Beijing's *China Daily*.

The following year, in September 2010, Cowen's government held a strategic 'think-in' at the Ardilaun Hotel in Galway. The think-in, which was later dubbed the 'drink-in' by the Irish media, would in turn spawn 'Gargle-Gate', an international news story prompted by Cowen's below-par communications performance at the event. On 14 September, Cowen gave a poor media interview to Cathal Mc Coille of RTÉ's radio programme 'Morning

Ireland'. The Taoiseach appeared irritable and at times misplaced words during the interview. This prompted Simon Coveney TD – a prominent member of the opposition to tweet – ‘God what an uninspiring interview by Taoiseach this morning. He sounded half way between drunk and hungover.’ Cowen’s cabinet colleague Dermot Ahern explained the poor performance by stating that it was well known that Cowen suffered from ‘nasal congestion’ (Kerr, 2010). The opposition, however, felt that Cowen’s interview performance was far less than inspiring. Róisín Shorthall (2010) of the Labour Party criticised the interview in no uncertain terms:

Such a performance by a Taoiseach at any time would be a matter of concern, but at a time when the country is facing such huge economic problems, it must set serious alarm bells ringing . . . When the country is crying out for leadership, looking out for some optimism for the future, we had an interview from a Taoiseach that was semi-coherent and offered no hope or no vision . . . The point of no return has now been reached.

By the following morning the story had gone international and was reported as far afield as the *Huffington Post* in the US, and the Paris-based *Le Post*, which ran the headline ‘Premier Irlandaise bourre sur le radio?’ (‘Irish prime minister drunk on the radio?’).

‘Cowen-Gate’ and ‘Gargle-Gate’ demonstrated that the communications performance of Cowen’s administration was bringing the state into disrepute. This questionable performance occurred, however, at a time when the hard-pressed Irish taxpayer was funding an ever-increasing army of government communications professionals. At Cowen’s department of the Taoiseach alone, there were three separate government press secretaries – an unprecedented

number, one each for Fianna Fáil, the Green Party and the vestiges of the Progressive Democrats – along with a burgeoning government information service. Separately, at departmental level, there were approximately 35 press officers and assistant press officers employed at the public service rank of assistant principal officer with annual salaries ranging from €45,000 to €60,000.

In addition, almost all of Cowen's government ministers had appointed special media advisors to assist them with press matters and crisis communications. First introduced in the early 1990s, most were employed at principal officer level within the Irish civil service with salaries ranging from €85,000 to €110,000. Funded exclusively by the exchequer, they were employed under Section 11 (1) of the Public Service Management Act 1997. The *Irish Media Contacts Directory 2010* listed 13 of these special media advisors. Operating across almost all government departments, 11 of these 13 political appointees agreed to be interviewed by this author in relation to their status and role as special media advisors. One media advisor was unavailable for interview due to travel and one refused outright to be drawn into any discussion as to their status or role as a publicly funded appointee.

In terms of experience, the Cowen administration's media advisors combined an eclectic mix of professional and intellectual formation. Most had extensive media experience, some as journalists, and university degrees, many to postgraduate level in areas relevant to their departmental portfolios. Just under half of the special advisors were members of professional bodies such as the National Union of Journalists or the Public Relations Institute of Ireland – which bind them to professional and ethical codes of conduct. Most, at the height of the Celtic Tiger, would have enjoyed far higher salaries as public affairs consultants in the

private sector. On paper at least, the advisers would certainly have appeared to represent value for money.

However, a cursory examination of their actual roles as professional communicators – and crucially, their status as publicly funded consultants – raises concerns as to whether or not such positions actually function in the public interest. Each of the eleven interviewees was asked to identify precisely their role as communicators – over and above those tasks carried out by the permanently appointed departmental press officers. In other words, they were asked to describe their role as politically-appointed and publicly-funded communicators vis-à-vis their public service counterparts. The responses were uniform, with the various media advisors indicating that politically appointed media advisors were there to deal with matters of a ‘political’ nature and to ‘at all times seek to enhance the media profile of the minister in question.’ One has to question whether, at a time of severe cutbacks in the public sector, it is morally problematic to use public funds in order to enhance the media profiles of individual government ministers. This is by definition, ‘spin’ and an activity that ought to be funded solely from within party political resources.

In examining the status and role of the Cowen administration’s media advisors, a number of political correspondents from the political press pool at Leinster House were interviewed. Out of a total of 46 journalists in the Oireachtas press gallery, approximately one third or 15 journalists were interviewed ascertain their experiences of dealing with politically appointed media advisors. Their responses were universally critical of what was generally referred to as the Cowen administration’s confrontational communications style.

One senior political correspondent expressed the view that the Cowen administration operated a communications and public relations strategy that amounted to ‘if not a culture of secrecy, then a culture of extreme discretion . . . to the point that we get nothing . . . no information.’ Another political correspondent observed that the government’s weekly press briefings given to journalists were ‘almost completely devoid of hard, real-time information’; yet another described them as ‘pathetic’. Most of the journalists identified a marked deterioration in government – media relations after Cowen’s election as Taoiseach. One journalist stated that ‘the house style has evolved into an abrasive and authoritarian approach towards media from the Taoiseach and the government press service.’ Many of the journalists were of the view that the media relations strategy employed by the Taoiseach was ‘incoherent’ and based on ‘cronyism’ – with certain journalists and media organisations deemed ‘beyond the pale’ and isolated – particularly if their coverage was critical of the Fianna Fáil led government. According to one journalist, ‘some of the government’s media handlers seem to have taken it upon themselves to take personal offence at legitimate criticism instead of facilitating a professional communications relationship.’ Another stated:

It now takes a sledgehammer to get simple information. This cute-hoor approach, which seems to be coming from the top, is actually counter-productive for everyone in society including the government itself, business sentiment and even our image abroad.

On paper and in theory at least, the Cowen administration’s team of highly qualified communications professionals should have been well able to provide the media – and the electorate – with clear communication, vital information and leadership at a time of unprecedented national crisis. However, at a cost of millions of euro per annum to the

exchequer in salaries and expenses, as well as lucrative contracts to public relations consultancies, the collective abilities of these communications gatekeepers – according to the political correspondents interviewed – appears to have operated a culture of ‘obfuscation’, ‘misinformation’, ‘obstruction’ and spin. According to the journalists interviewed, this culture proliferated and persisted throughout the Cowen administration – becoming almost tragic-comic in the days leading up to the EU – IMF bailout. Such a dysfunctional and ineffective communications regime ran counter to the assumptions contained within the literature (Miller, 2002; Gilpin and Murphy, 2008) about active engagement with journalists by powerful agencies during times of crisis. It also prevailed despite the electorate’s need for dialogue and clear communication at a time of national crisis.

Media advisers and the Fine Gael – Labour Party coalition

In March 2011, after a landslide victory at the polls, Fine Gael leader Enda Kenny was elected Taoiseach. Though his party had promised in its election manifesto to ‘deliver smaller, better government’ during a time of austerity and fiscal crisis, it opted to continue the practice of appointing dozens of politically appointed media advisers and programme managers. According to the *Irish Media Contacts Directory 2012*, there are now approximately 37 such political appointees. Funded exclusively by the exchequer, the salaries of at least 10 of these advisers breach the austerity-related public sector pay cap of €92,672 per annum. Several of the coalition’s key advisers receive salaries well in excess of €100,000 per annum. According to one newspaper report, the total cost of these advisers is just under €3.5 million per annum (Quinlan, 2012). In addition to this outlay, Kenny’s administration also spends large amounts of public money on the services of public relations consultancies. In the twelve months between April 2011 and April 2012 coalition ministers

spent approximately €200,000 on advice and speech-writing fees – despite having access to press officers in government departments (O’Brien, 2012).

The Irish government’s spend on the services of communications professionals is high by EU standards. In comparison, the Conservative – Liberal Democratic coalition of David Cameron and Nick Clegg in the UK – in a parliament with 650 members and a population base of over 62 million citizens – spend an annual total of approximately £6 million on government advisers. (BBC, 2012) Whilst Britain’s per capita spend on politically appointed advisers is approximately ten times lower than that of Ireland’s government, the British electorate is, nevertheless, exercised by Cameron and Clegg’s outlay on spin doctors. In a submission to the public administration committee enquiry on special advisers, the Constitution Unit of University College, London, observed (Hazell et al, 2012, 3) that

... concerns about special advisers have been raised ... (as to whether)

They exercise improper and/or disproportionate influence

They marginalise the civil service

They lack transparency and accountability.

Against the background of this debate on the status, role and cost of special advisers in Britain, the views of political journalists in Ireland were solicited on the ‘house style’ and communications performance of the Kenny administration’s media advisers. Again, their responses were almost uniformly negative.

In comparing the communications style of the Fine Gael – Labour Party coalition with the previous Cowen administration, one senior political journalist stated that the situation was now ‘worse’. He described the attitude of the government press service as ‘guarded, secretive

and paranoid.’ Several senior political correspondents lamented the lack of ‘proper ministerial briefings with off the record discussions of policy.’ Another political correspondent expressed the view that a number of special advisors and their ministerial charges were ‘childishly adversarial’ and that there had been a marked deterioration in communication style. The unanimous view of the political correspondents interviewed was that the investment by the Kenny administration in special advisors ‘did not represent value for money for the Irish taxpayer.’ Several went further and stated that aside from representing a waste of public money, many of the special advisors were actually damaging – rather than enhancing – the public profile of their ministerial charges. One of the most experienced of the political journalists interviewed, elaborated on this point:

Some of the advisors are incredibly defensive. They seem to have inherited a level of paranoia and hatred of the media from the previous administration. They don’t engage with us. This is a pity because the new government ministers and office holders are earnest, honest people. However, they are being actively handled in such a way as to hamper openness. Only the shrewd ones among them are prepared to interact with journalists.

Out of the total number of journalists interviewed, only two offered an alternative view of the status and role of the Kenny administration’s political media advisors:

This lot are definitely better than the previous incumbents. There is a top tier of advisors who are genuinely helpful and try their best to keep us informed. This is particularly the case in the department of finance. There are a few duds, but you get them in every organisation.

Another journalist offered the view that:

While the primary role of the advisors is to obfuscate and obstruct, they are slightly more impressive than the last lot. Despite this however, I don't believe that they act in the public interest. They act solely in the political interest of their minister – with varying results.

Based on the overwhelmingly negative views of the political journalists interviewed, it would appear therefore, that at a time of national crisis – where clear communication is an absolute priority – the Irish taxpayer, Irish political journalists and Irish politicians alike are ill-served by the communications culture fostered by politically appointed media advisors in Leinster House.

Conclusion

Given the high financial costs involved, it can only be assumed that the hiring of three dozen politically appointed media advisors by the Irish government is consistent with its desire to harness the power of the media for its own ends. Whilst the number of politically appointed media advisers within Ireland is relatively high – with the Irish taxpayer, on a per capita basis, paying ten times what British taxpayers do for 'special advisors' – their effectiveness, and value for money appears questionable. The relationship between media advisors and journalists is fractured and the facilitative symbiotic relationship between politically appointed media advisors and political correspondents appears to be absent. These advisors appear incapable of operating the 'optimum' strategic management of the news agenda as described by Hall (1978) to achieve 'primary definition' for their political masters. On the other hand, political journalists appear frozen out of what seems to be a dysfunctional and

adversarial culture of media ‘management’ that alienates them and leaves the citizen ill-served by way of clear communication from government. This is compounding a growing disconnect and lack of trust between the citizenry and their elected representatives.

The electorate ought to be reassured that the growing plethora of media advisors and programme managers act in the public interest and provide value for money. This might be achieved if their status and roles were given significant clarification and rendered amenable to public scrutiny: in other words, that their work behind the scenes of government – and the work of lobbyists and pressure groups – be made transparent and accountable to voters and taxpayers. This would be consistent with the recommendations made to the UK public administration committee enquiry on special advisors:

Special advisors need to be held accountable for their actions. This would be easier to achieve if there was greater clarity, advisor by advisor over the nature of their role (Hazell et al, 2012, 1)

Without such clarity, transparency and public accountability, the status, role and value for money of politically appointed advisors may well continue to be treated with some scepticism. In the absence of such clarity, the potential for public suspicion and scepticism towards the role of such advisors remains:

(S)pecial advisers [are] . . . treated with suspicion . . . (for) prioritising the minister’s interests against those of his colleagues, favouring short term political advantage over long term policy gains; selective briefing of the media; negative briefing against rivals

and opponents: favouring some interest groups over others; and cocooning the minister from unwelcome advice or different points of view (Hazell et al, 2012, 1–2).

A thorough independent review into the functions, status and role of politically appointed advisors is imperative at a time of national crisis where ethical and effective government communication is a premium requirement. The taxpayer is entitled to the rigorous scrutiny and regulation of the activities of advisors, communications consultants and all lobbyists and other stakeholders within the domain of public affairs and political communication. This might bring some clarity to the field of public affairs, lobbying and ‘spin’ within the Irish political landscape. It might also remove obstacles to clear communication and end the disproportionate influence of back-room ‘handlers’ on public and political discourse. The system of government communication that currently operates is dysfunctional and inordinately expensive. It achieves little by way of clear government communication and is the result of an anachronistic system of political cronyism. Moreover, it is profoundly anti-democratic in that it functions to deepen the crisis of public confidence in our political system at a time of major national fiscal, social and communication challenges.

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