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**Partnership Programme Managers in the
Reynolds / Spring Coalition
1993 – 1994: An Assessment**

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PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMME MANAGERS IN THE REYNOLDS / SPRING COALITION

1993-94: AN ASSESSMENT

INTRODUCTION

The Fianna Fail/Labour (Reynolds/Spring) coalition government which took office in January 1993 will be remembered principally for two things. The first is the developments in Anglo-Irish relations and in politics within Northern Ireland which culminated in the paramilitary ceasefires of August and October 1994. The second is the bizarre way in which that coalition finally disintegrated amidst indescribable confusion and recriminations.

This paper, however, concentrates on one of the less dramatic innovations in the practice of Irish government seen during the Reynolds/Spring coalition, the creation of a new class of public official, the partnership programme manager. Together with ministerial special advisers, who in one guise or another have been features of the administrative landscape for more than twenty years, programme managers constitute a new force in Irish government, operating along the blurred borders between politics and administration. Some see the new combination of advisers and managers as the precursors of a full blown ministerial *cabinet* system along European lines, others as an ad hoc expedient of relevance only while coalition governments are in power. This paper reviews the evidence on the innovation to date, and suggests further developments which may flow from it.

There is considerable disagreement about aspects of the performance of the first cadre of programme managers. These differences follow obvious fault lines, between those who regard such posts as appropriate for civil servants, and those who maintain that the Reynolds/Spring coalition demonstrated the superiority of political imports over career officials for that kind of work. The division of opinion corresponds to professional rather than to party political demarcations: career civil servants who worked as programme managers in 1993/4 are ranged against the political imports, all of whom were Labour appointments with the exception of Liam Cahill, who was selected by David Andrews of Fianna Fail. It is scarcely a coincidence that it is Cahill, who plainly feels that Labour programme managers

were more effective precisely because of their avowedly political objectives, who has done most to publicise the view that career officials were inherently unsuitable for the job (Cahill, 1994; Morgan, 1995).

Both factions describe programme managers as providing a new edge to the clarification and agreement of policy and to its embodiment in legislation. However, it has also been said that, through judicious selection and organisation of its programme managers, the Labour Party benefitted disproportionately during its coalition with Fianna Fail because the political people from outside the civil service supposedly outsmarted the more cautious career officials on whom most Fianna Fail ministers relied. Sean Duignan, himself a temporary import into government as Taoiseach Albert Reynold's press secretary, has written that Labour 'completely outmanoeuvred Fianna Fail at programme manager level, particularly when it came to the allocation of Euro[pean] structural and cohesion funds' (Duignan, 1995, 89). This claim seems to have gained considerable currency in political circles, in part perhaps because some Labour programme managers were disposed to court the media in a fashion quite alien to career civil servants. One former Fianna Fail member of the Reynolds/Spring coalition, Charlie McCreevy TD, has argued coherently against 'the mantra "it is only programme managers from outside the public service who are of any use ..."', and he has been at pains to defend the civil service generally against 'easy jibes and popular headlines' (McCreevey, 1995, A and B). Career civil servants acknowledge Labour's policy successes in the Reynolds/Spring coalition, but attribute this not to failings at the programme manager level but to the fact that the Labour leadership entered office with a more coherent set of policy aims, and a clearer view of how to obtain these, than did their Fianna Fail partners, conditioned by three years of coalition with the P[rogressive] D[emocrat]s to regard policy positions as bargaining chips in the game of coalition formation rather than as inalienable principles (private information). Fianna Fail's sheer familiarity with and confidence in the civil service was, they argue, probably also a factor in the party's attitude towards Labour's innovation (O'Halpin, 1993, p. 197; private information). Whether or not it is actually true that the political appointees outmanoeuvred their civil service analogues in the programme managers group, it was probably crucial to Labour that such a claim gained general currency in order to help to legitimate the party's alliance with the old Fianna Fail enemy. Only if

Labour could portray itself as having an arm lock on Fianna Fail, as the PDs had contrived to do during their coalition with Fianna Fail between 1989 and 1992, would the leadership be able to contain anti-coalitionist sentiment within the party. Furthermore, it was imperative that Labour obtain 'dramatic policy successes' if it was to have any hope of avoiding the heavy electoral reverses which have usually afflicted the smaller parties after participating in Irish coalition governments (Mitchell, 1993, p. 117). It was also important for Labour's political appointees that their achievements be publicly known, in order to counteract the charge against them aired by some Labour backbench TD that they wielded 'disproportionate power' as the Tanaiste's 'non-elected kitchen cabinet' (Duignan, 1995, p. 133).

Irrespective of the merits of the issue, events since the formation of the present Bruton/Spring/de Rossa coalition demonstrate that the political imports have won the practical argument about programme managers hands down - it is said that an incoming Fine Gael minister who had initially selected a civil servant to be his programme manager was then upbraided by his party colleagues and forced to reverse his decision (private information). Some observers claim that Fine Gael, a number of whose ministers, advisers and programme managers had no personal experience of government prior to December 1994, consequently suffered through inexperience in their first months in office. This criticism, however, cannot be made of the Taoiseach's appointment as his special adviser and programme manager of Mr Sean Donlon, whose unexpected resignation as secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs in January 1987 had surprised everyone (O'Halpin, 1991, p. 293). Only one member of the current Bruton government, Democratic Left's sole cabinet representative Prionsias de Rossa, employs a civil servant as a programme manager, and that may be explained partly by the fact that it is the first time that the party has played a part in any government. In the course of 1995 he has, furthermore, also assembled a publicly funded 'research unit to provide me with advice and analysis on policy proposals which arise on the general Government agenda outside my Department'. This unit of three full-time and two part-time staff evidently reflects Mr de Rossa's determination not to lose sight of broad policy issues while coping with his own demanding departmental portfolio (Carroll, 1995).

THE ORIGINS OF THE PROGRAMME MANAGER SYSTEM

The programme manager system had its genesis in the facts of Irish electoral life, rather than in the tortuous history of mainstream civil service reform over the last three decades (Dunne, 1989; Kelly, 1993; O'Halpin, 1991; Stapleton, 1991). It represents a response by Labour to the changing nature of government formation brought about by the erosion of Fianna Fail's core electoral support since 1981, which culminated in Charles Haughey's acceptance of coalition with the PDs after the 1989 general election. That development changed the terms of coalition politics. From being simply devices by which the Fianna Fail devil might be excluded from power for a time, coalitions have become the expected form of government, since 1989 twice accommodating Fianna Fail, and currently keeping that party from office.

The possibilities thrown up by the marked shifts in party electoral fortunes discernible since the early 1980s presented particular challenges for the smaller parties in the Oireachtas. The PDs' alliance with Mr Haughey's Fianna Fail in 1989 proved surprisingly long lived. In fact the PDs outlasted Mr Haughey in government, only quitting office when the attitude of his successor Albert Reynolds made it impossible to remain. An avowedly policy driven party, the PDs appeared to wield a major influence in government. Whether this was due to some unexpected interparty chemistry, to convergence on many policy issues, to Mr Haughey's evident personal commitment to appeasing Mr O'Malley and his PD colleagues at every turn, or to a combination of these factors, remains a matter for debate (Mitchell, 1993, pp. 111-12). But it is clear that in terms of policy the PDs saw themselves as relatively successful while in coalition with Fianna Fail, at least until Mr Reynolds succeeded Mr Haughey as Taoiseach in February 1992, even *without* programme managers or any comparable co-ordinating mechanism to help them. Why, then, did Labour insist on such a system from the outset? The answer presumably lies in the party's unhappy experience in the Cosgrave coalition from 1973 to 1977 and in the FitzGerald coalitions of 1981-2 and of 1983-7. Those governments were put together with the straightforward aim of excluding Fianna Fail from office. Policy was secondary to this goal. Although the FitzGerald coalitions did agree some policy aspirations, in practice these were watered down or largely forgotten in the rush of day to day business. In that era Labour ministers received little or no policy support from their party headquarters, and most of them were too preoccupied with securing

a fair crack of the whip for their own departments to look at wider issues. Labour ministers in the FitzGerald coalitions did follow the practice of appointing special advisers, but these generally provided essentially political advice and did not become involved in any executive roles within departments. In practice they operated mainly as ministerial confidantes.

In December 1992 the Labour leadership did not wish to be sucked into a Fianna Fail dominated coalition without a well articulated programme for action and a mechanism for securing its implementation. Such a mechanism would, it was hoped, enable the party to maximise its strength in a coalition and to exercise influence across a range of issues, including those where Labour ministers had no direct responsibility but on which the party itself had some views or definite policy position. (In this connection we may speculate that Labour probably drew lessons from the manner in which Mrs Mary Robinson had quite deliberately recast the presidential secretariat and had appointed a special adviser from outside the civil service, before embarking on what amounted almost to a constitutional revolution in the role of the presidency). What Fianna Fail negotiators found themselves dealing with in the wake of the 1992 general election was not simply a potential junior partner seeking a certain number of cabinet seats and prestigious portfolios for its senior figures, but a policy focussed Labour Party with definite aims across the spectrum of government. Labour intended to do more than insist on a comprehensive programme for government. It also wanted an agreed means of ensuring that all policy proposals outlined in any prenuptial agreement with Fianna Fail would be subject to informed and detailed tracking, fine-tuning and review by trusted officials, the partnership programme managers, whose responsibility would be to each minister personally rather than to his or her department. In this conception of things, programme managers had a political role in the sense that they would be expected to ensure that the government kept to the policy promises made in the negotiations leading to its formation. However, the skills required for the job were primarily managerial or administrative, rather than the qualities of political judgement and policy expertise which special advisers would be expected to bring to their work (Scally, 1995). The programme managers would ensure that old-style coalitions would be succeeded by a genuine interparty partnership where both parties would make it their business to deliver on their agreed programme. To do this, however, they would still need to

know the political minds of and have the confidence of their ministers. Judging by the appointments which Labour made, that party thought this an impossible job for career civil servants to fill effectively. The programme managers chosen by Labour ministers came from a variety of employment backgrounds in both the public and the private sectors - for example, the Tanaiste's programme manager Greg Sparks was a practising chartered accountant - but all were personally identified with the Labour party.

Fianna Fail adopted a different approach. Perhaps because they were so accustomed to government, its leaders evinced little interest in the problem of how to improve policy co-ordination in a coalition. They apparently saw the programme manager scheme largely as a device by which Labour could support a few more party functionaries and trusted advisers out of the public purse while in coalition. This may in turn have influenced their decision to rely almost exclusively on mainstream civil servants to fill the new positions, in undeclared contrast to Labour's apparent rush to put its party faithful on to the public payroll. The programme managers appointed by Fianna Fail ministers were, with one exception, not party backroom boys or political sympathisers with particular managerial or presentational skills, but career civil servants with extensive experience in ministerial private offices: the Taoiseach Mr Reynolds set the tone by appointing as his programme manager Donagh Morgan, who had been private secretary to three Taoisigh in succession. In March 1993 Mr Reynolds told the Dail that programme managers would be 'responsible within their Departments for ensuring progress on matters arising from the Partnership Programme for Government as it relates to their Department', in effect a statement of the conventional civil service view of their appropriate functions (quoted in Morgan, 1995). Although some officials had reservations about political imports into departments, mainly on grounds of the possible politicisation of administration, many senior civil servants quickly came to see the programme manager innovation as a good means of providing an effective co-ordinating mechanism at an appropriate level between departments (private information). This had been regarded as desirable ever since the publication of the Devlin report in 1969, while the Association of Higher Civil Servants had highlighted the need for 'much greater cross-department co-ordination of the Government Programme' in 1992 (Morgan, 1995). So long as they were competent at their job, and once it was

clear that they would leave office with the ministers who had appointed them, the political backgrounds of those programme managers appointed from outside the public service came to be seen less as a drawback than as a potential asset because they were 'on first name terms with their ministers' and could therefore deliver on matters agreed at programme manager level (private information; Morgan, 1995). The fact that, unusually for the public service, the rates of pay for the job varied from one programme manager to another - the government fixed the salary at not more than the maximum of the Principal Officer, Higher Scale - seems not to have been the source of any resentment or friction.¹

THE SYSTEM IN OPERATION

The programme manager system has now been in operation for almost three years. Its proponents, both civil servants and imports, remain sharply divided on some aspects of its workings. For example, civil servant programme managers during the Reynolds/Spring coalition saw it as no part of their function to deal with the press, whereas some Labour programme managers consciously used the media. Furthermore, Labour programme managers met weekly as a group with Labour officials and with some of the party's backbench TDs to review the progress of the party's agenda in government; by contrast civil servant programme managers, all of whom served Fianna Fail ministers, did not meet as a group to consider whether Fianna Fail's policy aims were being achieved. This was a crucial distinction: no career civil servant would be comfortable in such a forum. For this they were reprimanded by Liam Cahill, the only Fianna Fail political import to work as a programme manager (Cahill, 1994). On the other hand, civil servant programme managers have argued that as private secretaries to ministers they had had years of experience of the political nuances of policy, and were consequently well able to understand the party political as well as the administrative agendas of the ministers whom they served (private information). They also maintained that some Labour programme managers took time to find their feet because they had no previous inside knowledge of how government functioned, and that as a group the Labour appointees, both

¹ Civil servants were paid by reference to their existing rank. Political appointees were paid at a rate individually agreed with the Department of Finance, usually by reference to an assistant principal or principal officer salary scale.

Mr Sean Donlon, who left a senior position in industry to become Mr Bruton's programme manager and special adviser, receives the salary of the secretary of a government department.

programme managers and special advisers, basked in the reflected glory of two of their number, both of whom worked for the Tanaiste Dick Spring: his highly experienced special adviser Fergus Finlay, who was, rather confusingly, also nominally Mr Spring's programme manager in Foreign Affairs, and his programme manager in the Office of the Tanaiste, Greg Sparks. Mr Finlay was universally accepted as speaking directly for the Tanaiste, and he enjoyed particular eminence although he seldom attended the weekly meetings of programme managers unless he wanted 'to have a go' at somebody (private information from sources in two departments).

One aspect of the programme manager experiment which has not been addressed by either set of proponents is its influence if any on policy making. On the face of it the system might tend to reinforce ministerial predispositions towards quick fixes in areas of policy where a longer term perspective might bring better results. It would be farfetched to suggest that programme managers or other recent innovations such as special advisers in Irish administration have created a climate of political opportunism at the heart of government; they may, however, facilitate it.

The two sides of the argument about programme managers agree that the system has produced a number of significant benefits. These include the exchange of information and the co-ordination of action on aspects of policy; the defusing and resolution of bi-lateral issues between departments at an appropriate level; and most significantly, the orderly and timely advancement of legislative commitments. This last matter is the only one susceptible of external analysis, and it is discussed separately below (Cahill, 1994; Morgan, 1995).

THE LEGISLATIVE RECORD

Assessments of a government's 'performance', and attribution of credit or blame, is a particularly difficult and subjective exercise. However, the principal public protagonists in the programme managers debate both focus on laws passed as one key indicator of the innovation's effectiveness. Although they disagree sharply on much else, they say that the system produced 'a quantity and quality of legislation of unprecedented proportions' (Cahill, 1994) and 'an unprecedented volume of legislation ... 74 Bills were enacted in just under two years' (Morgan, 1995).

Unfortunately, however, this accord is marred by the fact that both writers are under a shared illusion. Analysis of the legislative record of the Reynolds/Spring government demonstrates that there is nothing 'unprecedented' about the volume of primary legislation passed into law in 1993 and 1994.

The legislative record does show that there was a marked increase in the volume of public acts passed during 1993, the first full year of operation of the programme manager experiment. The number of public acts went up from twenty nine to forty, an increase of over forty per cent. But 1994 saw only thirty four new bills pass into law. Taken together the figures for the two years provide little evidence that programme managers made a great difference to the flow of legislation. In historical terms, even the 1993 figure of forty laws is unexceptional - the second FitzGerald coalition got more acts through in its first year in office, while Fianna Fail did even better during Charles Haughey's first full year as Taoiseach. No government of any persuasion in recent times comes close to matching the legislative performance of Cumann na nGaedhail in 1923, 1924 and 1931, Fianna Fail in 1933, 1936 and 1947, or that of the second Costello interparty government in 1956 (Table One). It may be argued that primary legislation passed in any one year is far too crude and indiscriminating a measure to use - it is obviously not possible to measure the *quality* and complexity of laws put through the Oireachtas since the advent of programme managers - but a simple numerical count is better than nothing, and it is the main indicator which both sides of the argument have chosen to highlight to demonstrate the effectiveness of the new system.

In the absence of any hard data, it is impossible to judge the validity of a related claim put forward by both factions. This is that the advent of the programme manager system wrought a transformation in relations between those departments framing legislation and the Office of the Attorney General, the department responsible for putting draft bills in their appropriate legal form. Long before Father Brendan Smyth was ever heard of in Merrion Street, it was notorious for delay (Dooney, 1995; Scally, 1995; private information). In May 1923 the Attorney General Hugh Kennedy complained that an attack on his office by Kevin O'Higgins, the dynamic and acerbic Minister for Home Affairs, 'takes my breath away'. A year later WT Cosgrave, writing in terms to be ruefully echoed by Albert Reynolds sixty years

later, told Kennedy that 'I cannot but think that there is something seriously wrong in the administration of a Department' where important matters 'are allowed to remain undealt with for so long'.² One of the by-products of the weekly Wednesday morning meetings of programme managers instituted under the Reynolds/Spring coalition was a Thursday morning meeting of a Legislation Committee at which the Attorney General reported on the progress of bills in process of drafting. These meetings frequently brought to light instances when the sponsoring departments were at fault, and disposed of the time honoured departmental excuse that draft bills had disappeared into the black hole of the Attorney General's Office. The net effect, apparently, was greatly to clarify and to accelerate the drafting process (Cahill, 1994; Morgan, 1995; private information).

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The use of political appointees for the programme manager function parallels recent initiatives within Irish political parties towards developing and formalising policy formulation functions at headquarters level. There are obvious precedents: Dr Martin Mansergh, the *eminence grise* of Mr Reynolds' Northern Ireland policy, has in the last decade served both as a salaried adviser in Fianna Fail headquarters when the party was in opposition, and as special adviser on Northern Ireland to successive Fianna Fail Taoisigh, while Ivan Doherty, previously the general secretary of Fine Gael, is now ensconced in the public service as programme manager to the Minister for Trade and Tourism Enda Kenny. Such revolving door appointments may become the norm once the draft legislation currently before the Dail on state funding for political parties becomes law and provides an assured level of finance for party work.

If this prediction holds good No. 13 Upper Mount Street and the other party headquarters, 'traditionally little more than electoral campaigning clubs' mainly populated by expert constituency strategists and fund raisers, may increasingly be staffed by people who will deal continually with policy development even when their party is out of office, and who will move into the administration whenever their party is in government. If so, the programme manager experiment may be a further step in the transformation of Irish parties into political organisations with the capacity for

² Kennedy to O'Higgins, 31 May 1923; Cosgrave to Kennedy, 30 Apr. 1924, University College Dublin Archives, Kennedy papers, P4/760 and P4/493.

the sustained development and public projection of coherent and distinctive policies on every aspect of national affairs (anon., 1996).

CONCLUSION

Programme managers appear set to become a standard feature of Irish administrative life, at least under coalition governments. Furthermore, it is possible that they will be retained under single party governments as well, should any be elected in the near future. The desirability of a co-ordinating mechanism at an administrative level between departments, at least in relation to legislation, had been identified by civil servants even before it became a political imperative. Once Labour decided to strike a deal with Albert Reynolds, it became the conventional wisdom amongst politicians as well. The Labour view that the programme manager position should be held by party appointees rather than by career civil servants has now won over Fine Gael, their major coalition partner. When in opposition Mr Bruton made much of the influx of political appointees into the Reynolds/Spring coalition on grounds both of unnecessary cost and of the unhealthy politicisation of administration; he has, arguably, now politicised administration further by appointing the same person to fill the two roles of special adviser and programme manager within his own department. A few independent minded politicians such as Charlie McCreevey may continue to argue that civil servants make exemplary (and perhaps cheaper) programme managers. The likelihood nevertheless is that all parties will endorse the useful proposition that such functions can only be discharged by political appointees, once they identify suitable candidates for the positions, if only because this will enable the employment of party staff on the public payroll, thereby easing the burden on party funds. The result may be the development of increasingly professional party bureaucracies, largely funded from the public purse, absorbed not simply in problems of party organisation and vote maximisation but in policy development, and ready to play a key role in the machinery of government whenever their parties are in power.

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