Reform in Hard Times: Rationalising Irish state administration

Muiris MacCarthaigh
Queen’s University Belfast
m.maccarthaigh@qub.ac.uk

Abstract
The impact of the global financial and economic crises in Ireland has been particularly severe. As the scope of the state’s policy commitments has contracted as part of IMF and EU-supported attempts to bridge large public deficits, the organizational configuration of the state’s administration has also come into sharp relief. A centre-piece of each administrative reform initiative since late 2008 has been ‘rationalisation’ of the state agency population, but with relatively little regard to such issues as how restructuring initiatives affect policy coherence, accountability and the policy making capacity of parent departments. In this paper, drawing on a variety of data sources, we examine the extent and nature of reforms undertaken to date in the state agency sector, and the degree to which rationalisation has led to more efficient, accountable and joined-up government. The paper also addresses how centrally designed top-down reform initiatives are being met by other ‘bottom-up’ and ‘horizontal’ reforms designed to clarify roles and responsibilities in hard times. In so doing, the paper considers the wider consequences of contemporary administrative reform for the political character of public governance.
Introduction

The need to undertake significant fiscal and financial adjustments is widely shared by governments across the Eurozone. The pervasive crisis conditions have compelled governments to take a hard look at areas of spending to establish priorities in the allocation of funding, and to cut down or reorganize various public policy commitments. It also provides an occasion for governments to engage in structural reconfiguration of the state itself. As a result we see not only changes in what services governments are prepared to offer, and to whom, but also how they ‘manipulate the machine’ in order to do so (cf. Bouckaert et al. 2010; OECD 2011).

In this paper the focus is on the case of the Republic of Ireland (hereafter Ireland), a state that has been particularly badly affected by the global and Eurozone crises. From a position in early 2008 of almost full employment (4.9%) and general public debt of 27.5%, by early 2013 unemployment stood at 14% and the public debt at a precipitous 117%, in large part due to the state rescue of several indebted financial institutions. In parallel, government tax revenue collapsed, from a high of €47bn in 2007 to €32bn in 2010, after which it began to increase as new tax measures came into law. The challenge of addressing the public finances is compounded by the requirements of an EU-IMF loan programme into which Ireland entered in November 2010 (European Commission 2012). And while an initial series of tough budget decisions designed to bridge a rapidly expanding public deficit resulted in some ad hoc administrative reconfiguration, it is only with the election of a large centre left/centre right coalition on a reformist platform in 2011 that sweeping public management reforms have been initiated (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform 2011).

Central to the reform programme has been a process of state agency ‘rationalisation’; in effect a plan to reduce not alone the cost but also the number of quangos in existence. As part of this process a variety of rationales have been proposed, including the need to reduce duplication and overlap, enhance efficiency and performance, improve governance, strengthen accountability and generally ensure that ‘all state bodies are fit for purpose’ (DPER 2011: 3). However a number of other reforms also affect the state agency sector, including inter-agency, agency-department and politico-administrative relationships. The purpose of this paper is to begin an exploration of these dynamics, and to examine the consequences of several parallel reform initiatives on the state agency sector, as well as Irish public administration more generally.
Rationalising the state agency sector in Ireland

Organizational change affecting the manner of public governance may mean several things. It may be driven by efficiency considerations, for just as the ideas behind New Public Management (NPM) spread internationally during the 1980s and 1990s, so ideas associated with ‘post-NPM’ have been diffused during the 2000s. A renewed concern for ‘joined-up government’ (Bouckaert et al. 2010) has led in a number of countries to seek reductions in the number of agencies and to rationalize and recentralize policy-making and policy implementation capacity. This is no direct reversal of New Public Management, and the result is likely to involve a palimpsest of organizational inheritances, in which some functions and activities are decentralized and others centrally managed (Christensen and Laegreid 2007).

Following the election of the new Irish government in February 2011 on a reform mandate, and in line with the coalition parties’ manifesto pledges to engage in sweeping administrative and political change, a new Ministry, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, was created. This new Department broke the duopoly at the heart of Irish government in which decision-making power was shared, and contested, between the Finance and Prime Minister’s (Taoiseach’s) Departments (Hardiman et al. 2012; O’Malley and MacCarthaigh 2012).

Assuming functions from these two Departments, the new Department combined revenue expenditure functions with public service management, reform and industrial relations issues. The Department of Finance was left to focus on budgetary and macroeconomic issues, including revenue collection. The manifestation of the political commitment to reform in the new Ministry was driven not only by the need for fiscal discipline as demanded under the EU-ECB-IMF programme, but also by the desire for more centralized control of the bureaucracy and more standardized governance and accountability arrangements across the public service. Apart from budgetary cuts and the expectation of achieving more with less, the search for greater efficiency has involved (in the words of one senior official) ‘clearing the administrative landscape’, as well as reducing the numbers employed in the public service.
Figure 1 (below) identifies that considerable progress has been made since 2008 in reducing the total number of public servants in each of the main ‘sectors’ of government. Within this category, the non-commercial state agency (NCSA) sector is a relatively minor component, accounting for less than 5% of total employees; the numbers are normally slightly higher than recorded. This is because many departmental civil servants work in these agencies, despite being officially recorded as employees of their department (and thus within the civil service category in this Figure).

*Figure 1: Public Service Employment in Ireland 1994-2011, (with 2014 target as agreed with Troika in 2010)*

Source: www.gov.ie, databank (accessed 22/03/13)

In spite of its relatively small staffing complement, the state agency sector has been a primary focus of reform intent in relation to the former issue – organisational rationalisation. This was due to the perception that the number of state bodies had become unwieldy, expensive and unaccountable. Indeed as Figure 2 identifies, following a gradual increase in the number of such bodies from 1922, between 1990 and 2008 there was a rapid increase in the number of public bodies in Ireland, with the vast majority of these being quangos of various forms and function (see also MacCarthaigh 2012).
During the fiscal crisis of the 1980s, there had been an increase in the number of agency rationalizations, and as Figure 3 indicates, for a short period the number of agency terminations outstripped agency creations (between 1987 and 1992). This continued into the 1990s, but the aggregate number of agencies increased overall arising from intensive and ad hoc agencification between the early 1990s and mid-2000s. And while this growth is not unique to Ireland (Verhoest et al 2012), its comparatively unregulated development in the fifteen years prior to 2008 resulted in a complex organizational ‘zoo’, consisting of a considerable number and variety of public service organizations. Also of interest was that the increased use of state agencies did not form part of public service reforms initiated during this period. As assessed by several observers (Hardiman and MacCarthaigh 2011; OECD 2008), the reform initiatives displayed some elements of NPM thinking, but overall were guided by an ad hoc approach to improving administrative efficiency. The main targets of these initiatives were the core administration (the civil service line departments), rather than the complex organizational periphery of the Irish state administration.
By late 2008, when the scale of the banking and public financial crisis began to unfold, the government produced an early budget, which included proposals for a reduction in the number of state agencies. These rushed proposals envisaged a range of options for agency rationalisation, including sharing of back office functions, amalgamations to create a new agency and the absorption of agencies by parent departments. In total, the proposals envisage the number of agencies being reduced by 33. Figure 3 identifies that for this period, that of the Cowen government from 2008-11, there was a sharp increase in the number of agency monthly agency terminations.

As in Britain, the Irish government first targeted the ‘low hanging fruit’ – principally small, non-statutory advisory bodies with small budgets and few associated personnel. For example, as Table 1 below identifies, many of those agencies closed in the social policy-related field, involved limited revenue and staff savings.
CLOSING LARGER BODIES WITH STATUTORY AUTONOMY, SIGNIFICANT BUDGETS AND PERSONNEL, AS WELL AS LIABILITIES AND OUTSTANDING CONTRACTUAL AGREEMENTS PROVED MORE PROBLEMATIC HOWEVER, AND IN SOME CASES WERE NOT ACHIEVED. IN PART, THIS EXPLAINS THE PREFERENCE FOR ORGANISATIONAL ABSORPTIONS (USUALLY INTO PARENT DEPARTMENTS) OVER MERGERS OF BODIES INTO NEW AGENCIES OR STRAIGHTFORWARD TERMINATIONS. AS A RESULT THE FUNCTIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE STATE WERE NOT REDUCED AS QUICKLY OR AS MUCH AS MIGHT HAVE BEEN SUSPECTED. RATHER THE ORGANISATIONAL MODE OF DELIVERY SIMPLY ALTERED. BY MID 2010, ONLY 15 OF THE IDENTIFIED AGENCIES HAD CEASED TO FUNCTION IN THEIR PREVIOUS FORM. FURTHERMORE, THE PRINCIPAL EMPHASIS WAS ON REASSESSMENT OF THE FORMAL AGENCY-DEPARTMENT FRAMEWORK; THE ALLOCATION OF POLICY RESPONSIBILITIES WAS ONLY CONSIDERED AS A SECONDARY MATTER.

THE ELECTION OF A NEW GOVERNMENT IN EARLY 2011, FOLLOWING A CAMPAIGN IN WHICH POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM WERE FOR THE FIRST TIME A PROMINENT ELECTORAL ISSUE, GAVE A NEW IMPETUS TO AGENCY RATIONALISATION (AMONGST OTHER MEASURES). THE NEW MINISTER FOR ‘PUBLIC EXPENDITURE AND REFORM’ PUBLISHED A PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM PLAN (DPER 2011) WHICH IDENTIFIED 48 BODIES FOR ‘RATIONALISATION’ BY THE END OF 2012, AND ANOTHER 46 BODIES WHICH WOULD BE SUBJECT TO A ‘CRITICAL REVIEW’ BY THE END OF JUNE 2012. NOT ALL OF THESE BODIES WERE

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**Table 1: Early agencies closures in social policy field**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Saving</th>
<th>Staff reductions FTE*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Crime Council</td>
<td>€394,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Consultative Committee Racism &amp; Interculturalism</td>
<td>€628,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education DisAdvantage Committee</td>
<td>€100,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre for Early Childhood Development &amp; Education</td>
<td>€830,000</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Council on Ageing and Older People</td>
<td>€1.26m</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Health Council</td>
<td>€135,000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combat Poverty Agency</td>
<td>€2.7m</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children Acts Advisory Board</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis Pregnancy Agency</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordable Homes Partnership</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre for Housing Research</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless Agency</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Economic and Social Forum</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office for Active Citizenship</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library Council</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comhar</td>
<td>€390,000</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>€6.457m</td>
<td>41.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

national agencies, however, with several of the rationalisations involving local and regional organisations. The 2011 plan also proposed that there would be:

- New performance frameworks for managing department-agency relationships
- Sunset clauses for all new agencies
- Annual reviews on the continuing business case for all ‘significant’ agencies
- A requirement for ‘robust’ Service Level Agreements between Departments and State Bodies.
- Agency boards to be ‘scrapped’ and make ‘agency managers accountable directly to Ministers’

The critical review process marked an important difference from the approach adopted by the Tory/Lib Dem government in Britain concerning the parallel process of agency rationalisation, whereby a single omnibus piece of legislation was the vehicle for the quango rationalisation process. Instead, the Irish government adopted a case-by-case approach to rationalisation, and placed responsibility with the various parent Departments to manage the process, with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform acting as a central oversight, but not yet sanctioning, forum. The critical review process which took place during 2012 (and for which few documents have unfortunately been published) was informed by a set of principles devised by that Department:

- A ‘citizen focus’ to be respected and enhanced.
- Departments ‘to be the primary locus of public policy formulation, evaluation and analysis. Policy evaluation and advisory functions should not, as a general rule, be carried on by external State-funded bodies.’
- ‘Merging and restructuring of bodies should have a clear and demonstrable benefit in terms of delivering greater democratic control, improved service delivery and/or real cash savings.’
- ‘Decisions should take into account whether it is appropriate that a separate agency carry out particular functions in areas where specialist skills may be required…’
- Rationalisations should ‘be cognisant of duplication, overlapping and similarities of functions and roles of bodies…’
- Even if rationalisations do not proceed, ‘the possibility of sharing services, including back-office functions, should be explored to the maximum extent possible’.
- The government should consider on a regular basis ‘whether the goal for which an agency was originally established has been achieved…and whether the original objective remains relevant…’
- That there be a ‘performance focus’ and ‘an appropriate governance structure that delivers accountability for results and performance’.
- The Government will abide by agreements with unions made in 2010 in terms of staff mobility.

(Dáil debates, 28 June 2011, Vol. 736: Cols. 773-4))
Of interest here are the post-NPM ideas concerning re-centralisation of political control, the closing of the gap between policy development and implementation, new forms of co-ordination and the enduring emphasis on performance. In October 2012, a review of the rationalisation process gave an upbeat report on progress, noting that only one of the proposed 48 rationalisation for 2012 was not proceeding. However closer analysis revealed that only 17 of the remaining 47 rationalisations were to be completed by end 2012, with the remainder still at the planning stage, including the drafting of necessary legislation. In respect of the 46 agencies subject to critical review, 24 were to be rationalised (mainly by means of mergers and absorptions), while 10 were to remain in existence and a decision on the remainder deferred or part of wider reviews. In summary, the process was taking longer than envisaged arising from the variety of existing responsibilities and roles performed by agencies which required longer time-frames and in many cases new legislation which had not been planned for. Speaking about progress in the rationalisation programme, and indicating a more sanctions-based approach to the reforms, the Minister announced in late 2012 that no additional funding would be provided for agencies which were due to merge but had not yet done so, or were not making steps towards their own rationalisation.

We turn next to consider three dimensions of reform affecting the agency rationalisation process. Figure 4 sets out diagrammatically the focus of the work, as it identifies the ‘levels’ of reform which are occurring in parallel with the downsizing of the state agency sector in Ireland. The remainder of this paper seeks to flesh out the content of these dynamics, while further research will seek to examine their influence on the agency rationalisation project.
**The wider reform context: Reshaping the ‘Bargain’**

While the state agency rationalisation has been a prominent focus of the administrative reform effort, in parallel there has been an important shift in the nature of the public service ‘bargain’ in Ireland. The new government elected in 2011 made a commitment to establishing clear legal boundaries between bureaucrats and Ministers, and in so doing to more clearly provide for political and administrative accountability. It followed much criticism in the media of a perceived absence of accountability (or more specifically resignations and sackings) in the political and administrative realms for major project and policy failures, not least of all in respect of the enormous banking and financial crisis that befell the state in 2008. The new government committed itself to clarifying accountability roles across the political and administrative divide and augmenting the powers of parliamentary committees to hold individual public servants to account. Re-framing the political-administrative accountability relationship thus requires considering the nature of the ‘bargain’ between Ministers and senior civil servants.

In their work on ‘public service bargains’ Hood and Lodge (2006) explored the (normally) unwritten conventions that underpin the relationship between political executives and the bureaucratic system in a polity. A common formulation of this bargain is that in return for providing loyalty and competency to their political masters, bureaucrats are provided with
security of tenure and a level of remuneration such that they will not be induced to seek or accept bribes. And in return for politicians forfeiting the right to appoint, fire and change the terms of employment and tenure at will, bureaucrats adopt anonymity and give up the right to blame or express opposition to the government. Ministers take credit when government works well, but are expected to shoulder blame when problems occur.

More recently, and again drawing on the core PSB characteristics of competency, reward and responsibility, Lodge and Hood (2012) present a variety of scenarios for politico-administrative relationships in the context of the global economic crisis, demographic trends and environmental change. Their portrayal of ‘directing’, ‘hollow’, ‘local communitarian’ and ‘(barely) coping’ state models emerging from the global financial crisis envisages different type of PSBs emerging respectively, with the rider that a mixture of the key features of each being likely. Combining the scenarios they identify that between 2006 and 2012 Ireland has moved from low to high financial vulnerability, adding that for countries in the high financial vulnerability category and within the Eurozone, ‘…public services will have to be cut the hard way, through absolute reductions in wages and other benefits’ (2012: 88-9) and with considerable pressure to change traditional PSBs. They suggest that governments in the high vulnerability category would seek ‘new or renewed economic management skills, regulatory capability, or “smart new public management” capacity.’

While much of this scenario speaks to the Irish case, also of relevance is their description of a scenario in which ‘deep fiscal crisis might encourage a renewed stress on the kind of hard-core economic rationalism often said to have gone out of fashion by the late 1980s…’ with the result being ‘putting primary emphasis on cutting headcounts, reorganizing services into structures that are more readily cost controllable, axing activities with no immediate apparent payoff…’ (2012: 83-4). They also hypothesise a greater role for community and voluntary organizations providing ‘more top-up, supplementary, or even substitute public services’ (2012: 84).

The new government which came to power in early 2011 agreed to honour the terms of a deal struck by the previous administration with the trade unions (the ‘Croke Park Agreement’) in 2010, due to run to 2014. The core aspects of this deal had included industrial peace in return for no further pay cuts, no compulsory redundancies in return for staff re-deployment, a reduction in staff numbers, the creation of a unified public service
labour market and more external recruitment. In early 2013, however, as the need for further savings became clear, the government sought to renegotiate the terms of the Agreement. At time of writing, the ‘Croke Park II’ proposals included pay cuts, increased working hours, reductions in overtime and premium pay, strengthened performance management arrangements and restructuring of employment grades in the public sector.

Of specific relevance to this paper is the attempt to re-frame the relationship between Ministers and the civil service, or more specifically between the Minister and the senior civil service in each Department. Under the Reform Plan (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform 2011), proposals are being developed ‘to clarify accountability arrangements’, including the possibility of allowing civil servants to comment on policy matters in parliamentary committees. The allocation of accountability is an ongoing problem facing democratic governments (Behn 2001, Bovens 2007; Philp 2009) and the desire to re-frame politico-administrative relationships so as to clearly identify ‘who is responsible for what’ has traditionally proven to be quite problematic in Ireland, as elsewhere.

The 1924 Ministers and Secretaries Act has been the cornerstone of the Irish politico-administrative system and provided that the Minister is legally responsible for all that happened in his/her Department. The Act also deemed each Secretary-General to be personally responsible for the sound management of finances within their Department, and though individual cases of overspends or waste are not unusual, no holder of the position ever lost their job over failure to uphold this role. Reforms in the mid-1990s under the Public Service Management Act sought to devolve more managerial responsibilities from Ministers to senior civil servants but such devolution was limited in practice, and political accountability has rested with Ministers. The new reforms propose to reform the system and ‘spell out the legal relationship between Ministers and their civil servants and their legal accountability for decisions and for the management of Departments’ (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform 2011: 29).

Adopting the core aspects of the public service bargain described by Hood and Lodge - reward, competence and loyalty - Table 2 below identifies in more detail these changes by comparing the pre- and post-2008 crisis situations.
Table 2: The changing character of the Irish Public Service Bargain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of PSB (Hood and Lodge 2006)</th>
<th>Pre-Crisis</th>
<th>Post-Crisis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reward remuneration (tenure, reward)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sectorally-organised public service labour market</td>
<td>Moves towards a more fluid public service labour market</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job security</td>
<td>Job security, but subject to increased conditions and review (below)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Largely closed recruitment to senior levels</td>
<td>Fully open recruitment at senior levels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak linkage between performance and pay</td>
<td>Establishment of minimum standards for pay increases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steady increases in pay, routinely benchmarked</td>
<td>Reduced pay by means of cuts, levies, lower pay scales for new entrants. Annual increments suspended.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defined benefit pensions, tax-free lump sum</td>
<td>Pensions based on career earning average, existing pensions taxed, revised pension schemes for new recruits.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compentence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on generalist skills, ‘on the job’ learning for specialist tasks</td>
<td>Direct recruitment of experts, civil servants to undertake one-year private sector work placements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of agency form for policy development and expert recruitment.</td>
<td>Re-integration of policy advice functions from agencies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extensive use of external consultancies.</td>
<td>Little use of external consultancies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minister politically responsible for Department, some devolution of managerial responsibility to senior bureaucrats during 1990s reforms.</td>
<td>Initiatives to provide for much greater devolution and demarcation of accountability.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil servants prohibited from commenting on policy at parliamentary committees</td>
<td>Civil servants to be given greater latitude to comment on policy matters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**New co-ordination arrangements**

The search for better and new forms of coordination is a constant feature of public administration reform (Hood 2005: 19; Perri 6 2005). Conceptualisations of the character of post-NPM reforms are strongly informed by ideas concerning the need to address the perceived fragmentation of public service organisations – and cultures – brought about by NPM through new coordinating measures (Christensen and Laegreid 2011). A number of such measures have emerged in Ireland, influenced by developments internationally.
One prominent measure has been the development and emphasis on numerous ‘shared service’ initiatives, which are designed to integrate routine corporate tasks such as payroll, ICT and other common functions. A Human Resources Shared Service Centre (HRSSC) was created for the civil service as part of a wider reform seeking to introduce a shared service approach across the whole public administration. To this end a ‘National Shared Services Office’ was also created, to oversee various shared service initiatives across all sectors, including between state agencies, and agencies and parent departments.

Reflecting similar developments in other Whitehall systems, the government has advanced a plan initiated following an OECD review (2008) to create a Senior Public Service (SPS). Though the OECD has suggested this Service be open to senior bureaucrats from all sectors of the public service, the decision was made to confine it to central government department and agencies, with a view to later expansion. The logic behind the SPS was to encourage more mobility and professional development at senior levels, as well as a means of developing shared public service values and a common public service culture.

Another aspect of the development of stronger co-ordination mechanisms has been the rapid emergence of service-level agreements between department and agencies, as well as between agencies themselves. The public service reform plan (2011) set out a requirement for all departments to sign SLAs with their agencies, in order to provide a basis for improved performance and control over budgetary allocations. However, in the context of much reduced resources and greater demands for accountability, SLAs have become quite common between public bodies across the Irish public service. The issue arises as to whether the spread of SLAs is clarifying accountability, or causing deepening complexity by creating a new ‘bottom-up’ layer of bureaucracy. For example, a review by the Australian National Audit Office in 2010 had uncovered over 1800 SLAs being managed by 21 national public bodies, raising questions concerning their regulation and efficacy (ANAO 2010: 13).

**Micro-level reforms: Performance-based audits and metrics**

A final dimension affecting the agency rationalisation to be considered here concerns the introduction of new performance-based audits and metrics as part of an emphasis on greater cost-controlling and reduction. These include:
- A new performance measurement system
- A new system of performance-based budgeting to provide for greater alignment between allocated financial votes and tasks achieved
- A new ‘Medium-Term Expenditure Framework’ involving multi-year expenditure planning and estimates, in order to provide for advance consideration of annual allocations
- Increased use of programme evaluations.
- The introduction of ‘Public Service Delivery reports’ to be published by departments and agencies

Integrating these performance-focused reforms at a time of considerable restructuring in the state agency sector, when many agencies are in the process of mergers and termination, significantly complicates the reform process. A characteristic of post-NPM reforms in states of the Anglo-Saxon administrative tradition involves hybrid approaches to organisational control, combining traditional approaches to hierarchical authority with more contemporary ideas about performance management (Halligan 2011: 94-5). In this respect the Irish case provides a useful case study of how hybrid forms of organisation and performance management methods emerge in the context of conjoined reform initiatives and cost-saving measures.

And finally, the politics of reform in hard times

The series of what might be described as ‘whole of government’ reforms detailed above are taking place in the context of a turbulent economic period in Ireland. Politically, the Irish party system has traditionally had a strong bias toward the right and centre-right on economic affairs, and support for any left parties is much lower than the European average (Benoit and Laver 2005; Mair and Marsh 2004). Administrative reforms have never been the subject of partisan cleavage, and no party has ever taken a distinctive position on the role of the Irish administrative system or its reform.

A relatively narrow ideological spectrum has facilitated a considerable degree of cross-party agreement among the largest government-forming parties about the dimensions of response to the crisis. However, this has not been uncontroversial and the dominant conservative but cross-class Fianna Fáil party which had been in power since 1997, suffered an unprecedented electoral collapse in the general election of February 2011. The government formed at that date, holding the largest parliamentary majority in the State’s
history (68% of seats), was made up of the conservative Fine Gael Party and the smaller Labour Party. The election also returned a number of anti-bail-out candidates, independent representatives mostly from small socialist or other left-wing groupings who did well in working-class urban areas. In particular, Sinn Féin successfully took up the anti-austerity cause with vigour.

Of interest to this work, however, is how the profile of state retrenchment does not change significantly from one government to another, despite the participation of the Labour Party after February 2011. Indeed the Labour Party has assumed responsibility for the Department charged with the administrative reforms and cost savings programme identified here. The absence of partisan political divisions on the content of the reforms provides a strong basis for their implementation, and for the ongoing study of the reform implementation process. The next stage in this research is to look in more detail at how the agency rationalisation process has been hindered, or facilitated, by the parallel reforms identified in this paper, and to explore the consequences of this for political–administrative relationships in Ireland. In so doing, the extent to which reforms have indeed delivered a more efficient, accountable and joined-up government will be further explored.
References


