

From: Peter May
Principal Private Secretary

16 May 2000

cc PS/Mr Semple
Mr Loughran
Mr McCusker
Mr Haire
Mr Lavery
Ms Flanagan
Mrs Devlin
Mr McKervill

Note for the Record

VISIT TO DUBLIN

During a very useful visit to Dublin last week, Helen Roulston and I met:

Dermot McCarthy, Secretary General to the Cabinet
Paddy Teahon, recently retired Secretary General to the
Department of the Taoiseach
Gerry Hickey) Programme Managers to the Taoiseach
Katherine Bulbulia) and Tanaiste respectively
Wally Kirwan, Assistant Secretary at the Department of the
Taoiseach
Joe Lennon, Government Press Secretary.

The main points made were:

Structure:

- the Department of Taoiseach has expanded in numbers and role significantly in the past decade because they are the guardians of the social partnership arrangements which provide a social and economic policy leadership role;
- responsibility for NI and EU matters also rest with the Department, necessitating close links with the DFA but the policy lead in the high level issues rested with the Department of the Taoiseach;
- the Department has a different order of relationship with the Department of Finance than other Departments. A tension is inevitable in terms of outlook, but this should be as constructive a tension as possible.

- a number of ad hoc Cabinet Committees and inter-Departmental teams – chaired by junior Ministers or senior officials - exist and operate in areas like drugs, social exclusion, infrastructure and e-commerce. The Committee structure was less formal and extensive than in London;
- a key distinction between Dublin and London was the much greater informality in the former jurisdiction because everyone knew everyone else and networks existed already. In Northern Ireland, the size implied that informality would be an important factor;
- in the 1980s Secretaries General never met. There was still no formal equivalent to the Whitehall Permanent Secretaries weekly meeting but much greater informal contact.

Advisers

- most (but not all) Ministers had advisers (some of whom were civil servants on secondment) and the Taoiseach and Tanaiste also had Programme Managers who oversaw the achievement of the Government's agreed programme, produced annual reports on progress as well as identifying weekly political difficulties with Government policies. The Programme Managers acted as the eyes and ears of their Ministers but had no formal authority over the system;
- there were weekly meetings of all the advisers ahead of Cabinet to spot likely difficulties. Programme Managers also attended meetings on forthcoming legislation and on communications issues;

Information

- the Taoiseach appointed the Government Press Secretary and the Tanaiste the Head of Government Information Service. The two had to work closely to present a coherent Government line. They had some difficulties co-ordinating Departmental Ministers and gathering information on key issues of the day but these were attributed to resource shortages.

Consensus building:

- difficulties in Cabinet were rarely due to political infighting between coalition partners. The problems nearly always arose because of poor political sensitivity or from Departmental differences either of policy or in terms of a turf war. The Department of the Taoiseach would be aware of such problems on the grapevine and seek to resolve the issues informally by offering a meeting to sort out the way forward for Cabinet endorsement.

Authority of the Centre

- the Department of the Taoiseach was seen to have a wider responsibility beyond its policy responsibilities for the overall functioning of Government;
- clarity over the extent of the role of the Centre through the social partnership leadership role led to a greater authority over Departments elsewhere;
- the capacity of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to play a Prime Ministerial role depended on the functions the Centre could exercise in respect of Departments (eg through the Programme for Government and under policy leadership roles).

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