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Editors' introduction

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The impetus for this special issue of *Administration* is the retirement of Michael Mulreany after over forty years of service with the Institute of Public Administration (IPA). When we first discussed the possibility of producing this special issue with Michael, in his typically self-effacing way, he was reluctant to see himself in the spotlight. Michael has always preferred to let his work speak for itself. His main objective has always been to develop capacity in the Irish public service. As Maurice Manning details in his foreword to this special issue, this has primarily been done through his committed and innovative leadership of the Whitaker School of Government and Management, the education division of the IPA. The title of this special issue, 'Building capacity in the Irish public service', is an obvious one.

The core objective of the Whitaker School of Government and Management is the advancement of the theory and practice of public administration. Speaking at the launch of the school, then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern TD noted that the school marks:

the coming together of two great pillars of public administration – Dr Whitaker and the IPA. Both are bywords for the best characteristics of public service in Ireland. Characteristics such as impartiality, integrity and commitment to progress that have served us well over the years.¹

¹ Ahern, B. (2004, 12 July). *Speech at launch of Whitaker School of Government and Management*. Institute of Public Administration.

Under Michael's stewardship these characteristics have remained to the fore, as have the advancement of theory and practice of public administration.

Another notable achievement Michael led on was the development of postgraduate programmes at the Institute, culminating in the creation and development of the Doctorate in Governance and the IPA taking sole responsibility for the administration and delivery of the programme. Michael was at the centre of all these developments (though as he would be quick to note himself, working with the support of Directors General and colleagues). Beyond the Whitaker School, Michael has also been instrumental in many of the wider changes affecting the Institute and helping place it where it stands today, ready for the next phase of development at the service of Ireland's public administration.

Michael's commitment to and support of students at the IPA has been immense. It was therefore no surprise that in framing this special issue that, in addition to contributions from long-standing academic collaborators, Michael was keen to provide an opportunity to write and publish to IPA colleagues and former and current students of the flagship Doctorate in Governance Programme.

Following on from the tribute to Michael by recently retired Chancellor of the National University of Ireland, Maurice Manning, the contributions to this special issue are grouped to reflect some of the different interests and collaborations of Michael over the course of his career. The first contribution, from Secretary General David Maloney and colleagues in the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform, reviews the history of public service reform over the past fifteen years. It reflects well the changing context and challenges, but enduring focus on delivering better public administration, which the Institute has sought to support. This is followed by Michael's own contribution, together with his long-time IPA collaborator, Denis O'Brien. In 2011, Michael and Denis brought to fulfilment a wish to publish an anthology of writing on the public service and public servants. *Lord of the Files*² is a hugely comprehensive record, but more than that, it celebrates what is distinctive about the work of the public service and the values, which those employed therein, seek to uphold. In their contribution to this special issue, Michael and Denis return to 'the files' and include new material

² Mulreany, M. & O'Brien, D. (2011). *Lord of the files – Working for government – An anthology*. Institute of Public Administration.

that has emerged since 2011. They also reflect on a growing recognition of the value of storytelling and narrative in teaching and learning.

The next two papers, by Frank Barry and Ciáran Casey, similarly look back in order to inform our thinking about the present day. An important subtext to their papers is the role which administrators can play in influencing, what emerges with hindsight, as significant interventions. Barry's paper revisits the policy debates of the 1950s between the Departments of Finance and Industry and Commerce and traces the structure of the modern Irish economy to the outcome of these debates. Casey's paper revisits the conclusions of his 2022 book on the history of the Department of Finance.³

The next group of papers address issues related to governance. Good public governance is ultimately about meeting the needs of and achieving outcomes for citizens. This is something which Michael has championed throughout his career. John Dooley's paper examines digital governance in Ireland, and in particular reflects on emerging digital platform regulatory practices; Caroline Loughnane's paper addresses university governance and the impact of changes under the 2022 Higher Education Authority Act; Ryan Feeney's paper reviews the considerable value of informal governance arrangements in supporting North–South cooperation on the island of Ireland in the years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement; while, Aidan Horan and Mark Mulreany's paper looks at sustainability reporting.

Stakeholder engagement is a prominent theme of the final two contributions. Stephen Weir examines the history of healthcare reform in Ireland from the early years of the state to the present day, through the lens of the relationship between government and the medical profession. Finally, Peter Doran's paper writes about a prominent environmental and sustainability issue, Lough Neagh in Northern Ireland, and how a rights-of-nature approach could support a better environmental outcome for the lough, while also building community in Northern Ireland. An article we had hoped to include was not completed. Gerald Dawe, a longtime lecturing associate, and more importantly friend of Michael's, had begun to write a piece for this issue of *Administration*. In May 2024, Gerald passed away. May he rest in peace.

³ Casey, C. (2022). *The Irish Department of Finance 1959–1999*. Institute of Public Administration.

One final reflection is that all the people who contributed to this issue have been influenced by Michael in one way or another, as colleagues or students. T. J. Barrington, the first Director of the IPA, in his book *The Irish Administrative System*,⁴ wrote:

In the last analysis, people, whether as the persons to be served by public administration or the persons who are staffing the public bodies, are the beginning and end of the story. They are both the motivation and the ultimate control – the engine and the brakes – of the instruments of government.

First and foremost, Michael placed other people at the forefront of his work. His ability to remember the names and details of the many hundreds of students who have passed through the Institute is legendary, as is his concern for their advancement and welfare. It is a tribute to Michael and his colleagues that so many have gone on to fill the most senior positions across the public service. We hope this special issue reflects in some way Micheal's enduring contribution to the public service and the Institute of Public Administration, and the people he has met and supported along the way.

⁴Barrington, T. J. (1980). *The Irish administrative system*. Institute of Public Administration. The quote reference is included in *Lord of the files* (see footnote 1).