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Updating the files: Understanding the public service through storytelling and narrative

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Abstract

In this article, we reconsider our 2011 book *Lord of the files: Working for the government*, which was the first of its kind to collect written sources from hundreds of writers inside and outside the public service on the realities and complexities of Irish public service life. Its portrayal of institutional life, state administration and the delivery of public services as they play out within the values expected of public servants aimed to provide a rounded understanding of what is conventionally known as ‘working for the government’.

In the decade or more that has elapsed since publication, the context for public policy and administration in Ireland has significantly changed. We identify what we believe are important narratives arising out of momentous events that have defined recent history and which have affected how the public service carries out its duties. We frame these narratives and bring to the fore our original objectives in the anthology by reflecting on how, in recent academic discourse, storytelling is seen as important to understanding the operation and culture of organisations. We take the opportunity to present and discuss new material, and previously overlooked material, that would earn a place in an updated anthology and maintain our purpose of improving the understanding of the public service.

Keywords: anthology, literary observation on public service life, narrative, policy decision-making, public service, storytelling, teaching public administration.

Introduction: Reviewing the files

Our anthology *Lord of the files: Working for the government* (Mulreany & O'Brien, 2011) was published by the Institute of Public Administration in 2011. In approximately 600 pages of anecdote, record, commentary and story, we attempted to capture the realities and complexities of public service life across different sectors – civil service, local government, healthcare, education, policing and security. This ambition was framed in time across the decades from the roots of Irish public administration in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, north and south, through pre- and post-independence to the first decade of the twenty-first century. The extracts we presented in the book tell important, often overlooked, stories about the evolution of the Irish state.

In the introduction to the book, we lamented the fact that despite its length, we had to leave out copious interesting material; we were reluctant to strain the reader's patience. The final roundup resulted in an anthology which drew on both internal and external written sources on the public service. The former ranged from memoranda and reports to articles and books, both novels and memoirs. The writers external to the public service included a medley of sometimes complimentary and other times bemused commentators, as well as an array of canonical figures in Irish literature.

The cornucopia of material we collected on milestone events such as entering and leaving the public service, on frontline duties, engagement with ministers and punctilious problem-solving in the face of the challenging issues of the day, together with ample evidence of vocational verve, self-fulfilment and, indeed, downright bafflement and despondency, made the book a valuable anthology of the nature of work itself and a human history of life in Ireland over the last 100 years.

Lord of the files was published in the midst of the financial crisis, a time in which public servants were subject to multiple and persistent criticisms for their presumed advantages in pay and pensions and their comparatively secure working conditions. The negative commentary provoked by their perceived insulation from the full impact of market forces spilled over into adverse commentary about their performance. There were resounding echoes of earlier public debates about delivering better government (Seanad Éireann, 1996) in the criticisms of sclerotic management systems and poor service delivery. In short, the currency of the important roles played by the country's public servants was being devalued on a weekly basis.

The material in the book challenged such simplified stereotypes and provided a more balanced perspective. Our purpose was to portray a rounded picture of serving the public and working for the government. What emerged, warts and all, presented public service not only in the throes of day-to-day work but at moments of crisis and national historic importance. We presented the cut-and-thrust of dealing with both public management and public policy, involving a varied cast of politicians, interest groups, the business community and, most importantly, the public.

The book was reviewed favourably. Martin Mansergh (2011), in his review in the *Irish Times*, ventured that ‘generations of public servants have all the best stories’ and concluded that ‘public servants and their critics will equally enjoy the book, with enough ammunition for both’. Senator Maurice Hayes (2011), a former head of the civil service in Northern Ireland, in his review in the *Irish Independent*, saw the book in terms of the ‘empire striking back’.

By pointing to evidence in the book, Senator Hayes reminded readers that a sense of service, rather than monetary reward, was a public service motivator. We found that reviewers, in general, were sensitive to the engagement of the book with the culture of the public service. This indeed was our intention. It was important to portray institutional life and human interactions as they play out within the values expected of public servants: integrity, impartiality, political neutrality, confidentiality, accountability, accessibility and adaptability.

Since publication, as we had hoped, the book has been used as a source of stories to illustrate points in public fora. For example, then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, quoted from it when launching the Civil service renewal plan in 2014 (Hand, 2014). In the spirit of renewal, in this article, we revisit the book with some fresh thoughts.

In the section immediately below, ‘The missing files’, we identify what we believe are important narratives arising out of the momentous events and the changing context of the public service over the past decade, the period following the publication of *Lord of the files* in 2011. In the section following that, “‘Public servants have all the best stories...’?”, we frame these narratives within the context of the developing literature on the use of storytelling to understand the inner life of organisations. In ‘Arranging the files’, we reflect on our original approach to ordering the material we collected for the anthology. Then, in ‘Replenishing the files’, we present and discuss material we could not originally include in *Lord of the files* to improve our understanding of the public service.

The missing files

In the book, we noted the evolution of concerns, and associated public-sector challenges, surrounding governance, globalisation, consumerism, demographic change and the environment. These concerns have amplified over the intervening years and been punctuated by major geopolitical and economic events: a pandemic, Brexit and the conflict in Ukraine, all of which have affected the population either in full or in part, directly or indirectly, and have placed public service in a central role. Against that background, we can ask what insights have emerged in written sources over the past dozen or more years.

In that period, the economic cycle has turned again in the country's favour. Public servants now manage, and provide policy advice about, a country increasingly driven by technology and the Big Tech platforms. Accessible technology has altered the dynamic between citizens and government, and tech-fuelled change has pointed to a future of increasing human-machine collaboration. Ireland, at least for some, is rich and networked.

For others, the reality is deprivation and isolation. The debates about house prices and rents have resumed with added vigour. Anthropogenic global warming continues to create eco-dread and, for some, annihilation anxiety. There is pressing demand for clean energy transition and an active circular economy. Governance problems in public bodies have increasingly featured in the news cycle. There has been a significant shift in demographics, both in terms of population growth and composition, as Ireland continues its transition to multiculturalism and the absorption of immigrants. Nationally, and with a post-conflict Northern Ireland, we continue the slow progress towards a meaningfully functioning shared island. Internationally, we have been witnessing a greater focus on supply chains and threats to the rules-based world trading system.

Public management and public policy have been central to all the foregoing. The public expects the political system and public administration to provide both short- and long-term solutions. It demands evidence of effective decision-making, good stewardship of resources, and accountability for outcomes. Evidence-based policy should be accompanied by a coherent and consistent set of policy prescriptions. Best practice and public confidence are, as always, the targets.

And, of course, the public sector has evolved with, and responded to, the challenges and expectations. Public-sector reform continues.

New public management gave greater prominence to issues such as performance management and enhancement, and has informed how public services are designed and delivered. The public service reform plan, *Better Public Services* (Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform, 2023) provides a clear vision of change based on the three pillars of evidence-informed policy, digital transformation and innovation at scale, and the organisation and workforce of the future.

The public service workforce was our major interest in *Lord of the files*. We hoped that readers would get a sense of the quiet competence with which public servants fill the gap between policy intention and its delivery. This brings multiple challenges, including the ability to think clearly about knotty, so-called ‘wicked problems’ based on the sober mastery of detail. Then comes the need to weigh up positive and negative outcomes, and to make authoritative decisions involving the spending of public money often within tight budgets.

Not least, there is a requirement to perform these duties while complying with directives, codes, standards and regulations around good governance, ethical behaviour, inclusive and diverse work practices, transparent expenditure and the sustainable use of resources. In 2008, the then Director of the National Museum of Ireland, Dr Pat Wallace, who was giving evidence to the Public Accounts Committee, recited a memorable litany of National Museum strategies, policies and procedures which we captured in the anthology. There was an organisational statement of strategy, human resource strategy, customer care charter, risk management policy, collections disaster plan, emergency evacuation procedures, policies on human remains, conservation, loans, education, child protection, travel, procurement and risks (Wallace, 2008). ‘We have so many policies,’ he informed the committee, ‘that I sound like a broken-down insurance man.’ Today’s senior public servants can understand his sentiments.

Of course, *what* public servants do, and the need to provide assurances about *how* they do it, are equally important factors as they address their daily functions on behalf of the minister and the public. In doing so, public servants are guided by established practices. But not always; readers will recall that T. K. Whitaker’s *Economic development* (1958) emerged outside of settled norms of public service work practice but retained the compelling, even lapidary, logic associated with effective public-sector decision-making. Looking across the hundreds of extracts we assembled in the book, it is difficult

not to be impressed by the attention to duty and commitment to public good which comes through. Times and conditions have changed from the 'linoleum palaces' described by some public servants at the foundation of the state to the smarter, more well-appointed offices of today, but the principles of good administration endure.

'Public servants have all the best stories'...?

In a 1992 essay, 'Blackthorn & bonsai *or*, A little brief authority', the celebrated Northern Irish poet Michael Longley wrote of how he was invited to read his poems to a group of civil servants participating in a leadership programme over several 'taxing' days (Longley, 1995/1992). These were the service's brightest being prepared for promotion. Fearing a course of 'undiluted poetry' might 'interfere with digestion', Longley decided to use his after-dinner session to provide what he believed was the best example of *good* leadership from the world of arts. He told a story about Lawrence Gilliam, the head of the Features Department of the BBC and responsible for managing great poets like Dylan Thomas and Louis MacNeice. In 1945, Louis MacNeice was exhausted. He had written and produced seventy programmes in four years. He was thinking of quitting. He asked the BBC for three months off, without pay, to recuperate and consider his future. Gilliam covered up for him so successfully that he enjoyed a full year's leave of absence, *with* pay. MacNeice returned refreshed with the *Dark tower* in his pocket ('the finest feature ever put out over the airwaves by the Third Programme') and brought with him a new crew of writers, including Sam Hanna Bell, John Boyd and W. R. Rodgers, who 'affected broadcasting in Northern Ireland for the next twenty years and more'.

Longley's point to the future leaders of the civil service was simple but provocative: it is possible to demonstrate good leadership by *not* overtly leading in the conventional sense, but by protecting, supporting, and sometimes turning a blind eye like Gilliam. In today's regulated and audited environments, Gilliam's covering for MacNeice would certainly be personally risky, if not impossible outside of income continuance plans. But it does raise the question of how willing we are to accommodate unorthodox solutions in our pursuit of innovative practices in the public service.

The invitation extended to Longley to address the civil servants, and his decision to frame his instructive talk on leadership by way of illustration and narrative, speaks directly to our own objective as

editors in *Lord of the files*. We wanted to compile a chronicle of state writing – primary narratives – that could be deployed by scholars, public service leaders and staff, and citizens, for the benefit of historical understanding, contemporary assessment and future transformation.

Such academic interest in the value of stories has been developing, particularly over the past two decades. Scholars have written about the use of stories, literary sources and narratives in public administration (Bevir, 2011), policy-making (Lownes, 2016; Fadlallah et al., 2019), economic history (Ó Gráda, 1991), management (Comer & Holbrook, 2005; Short & Ketchen, 2005; Morris, Urbanski & Fuller, 2005) and leadership (Auvinen, Aaltio & Blomqvist, 2013; Mládková, 2013).

In public administration and public policy, it is quite easy to see how narratives and stories can be deployed in areas such as influencing the views of policy participants, agenda-setting, advocacy, stakeholder consultation and implementation. In leadership and management, narratives and stories can be important in articulating visions, setting objectives, developing organisational culture, simplifying and humanising issues, building trust, resolving conflict and building teams.

Other disciplines, including empirically based ones, also recognise the power of narratives. Behavioural economics, which overlaps with social psychology, harnesses scenarios and stories to challenge the purely rational economic model. In economics more generally, Robert Shiller (2019), a Nobel Prize winner, has produced an important book, *Narrative economics*, which demonstrates how stories can drive major economic events. Readily understood examples are narratives around property booms and busts, artificial intelligence replacing jobs, bitcoin, stock market bubbles, ‘animal spirits’ in investments, ‘too big to fail’, ‘this time is different’, and so forth.

There is, in fact, a long history of narratives and stories in economics stretching back to its foundations. Adam Smith in *The wealth of nations* (1776) used the eighteen specialised tasks involved in making pins to illustrate how specialisation and the division of labour, with each worker becoming highly efficient in one task, could increase productivity. Shiller’s arguments have gained traction in economic research, though somewhat predictably some economists write about ‘empirical narrative economics’ (Roos & Reccius, 2024).

There is also a long history of narratives and stories in literary work useful to an understanding of the public service. Irish novelists and poets attempt to transmute the humdrum of office life and provide

insightful commentary on human interactions and the bureaucratic functions of the state.

Thirty years ago, within the context of post-colonial studies, scholars were combing the work of the Irish literary revivalists and cultural nationalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to construct a narrative on how writers were central to important acts of cultural self-definition. W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge, Lady Gregory, T. W. Rolleston, Standish J. O'Grady, Padraig Pearse, Thomas McDonagh, and many others, were, to use Declan Kiberd's phrase, 'Inventing Ireland' (1995).

There is now an emerging scholarly focus on the relationship between post-independence writers and their work for the state and their experiences within the public service. These writers, in Irish and English, contributed daily to public administration (and earned a livelihood in the process) and yet turned their critical eyes on their employers and the systems they held in place. They critiqued the power structures and office politics, the seemingly illogical logic in decision-making, and the slow and baffling procedures that made bright and conscientious workers subservient to paperwork.

In a sense, these works are acts of imaginative cannibalism, not so much cases of biting the hand that feeds you as much as eating the structures and duties that provide daily purpose and (some sort of) fulfilment. Such relationships with work find a correlative in Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *An eochair* (2011/1953), which was superbly translated into English by Louis De Paor and Lochlainn Ó Tuairisg for *Lord of the files*. In the story (*The key* in translation), an identity-less protagonist, known simply as 'J', is a paperkeeper – 'the most responsible and difficult position in the Civil Service' – who gets locked into his office because his key splits in half. His desperate predicament unfolds amid a flurry of comic and escalating concern by civil service staff and politicians, all to no avail. To survive, he is forced to eat the sacrosanct material under his charge.

The story is a subversive and comically absurdist critique of bureaucracy that can hold its own against the great Russian masterpieces of the nineteenth century and East European work of the twentieth century. It is no surprise to learn that Ó Cadhain held a civil service post in Rannóg an Aistriúcháin, the translation section of Dáil Éireann. His storytelling and narratives and, indeed, the narrative-making that surrounded him – and that of Myles na gCopaleen/Flann O'Brien, Seán Ó Ríordán, Mervyn Wall, Hugh Leonard and many others – held an instructive mirror up to

dysfunctional organisational cultures and the ‘souls on ice’ within them. By doing so, they contributed to a culture of change.

Writers outside the service constructed similarly instructive narratives, if somewhat obliquely. Following their military activities in the War of Independence and Civil War, with the attendant hardships and hopes for a new Ireland, writers were facing social conservatism, Catholic piety and cultural stagnation. Sean O’Faolain, Frank O’Connor and Liam O’Flaherty, and a host of other writers from Kate O’Brien, Patrick Kavanagh, Mary Lavin up to John McGahern and Edna O’Brien, acted like an ‘opposition political party’ (Brown, 1990). Their writing critiqued economic practice and the prevailing social mores and, indirectly, the policy decisions and legislative acts that gave them shape and sustenance.

Such imaginative engagement with socio-political realities is grist to the willing literary mill for Irish writers. The political and administrative system, therefore, is perennially under scrutiny. Sometimes, writers take a backward glance, sometimes a contemporaneous side-glance, and sometimes a prophetic gaze, as in Paul Lynch’s Booker prizewinning novel, *Prophet song* (2023), a speculative and viscerally engaging work of fiction that presents Ireland under an authoritarian regime. In this dystopian world, Ireland’s dutiful public servants are, chillingly, all too ready to implement draconian state policies and laws.

It would appear, therefore, that public servants do not necessarily have *all* the best stories. But they do have important and interesting ones. This is inevitable because of their involvement in advising on policy, much of it highly consequential, stewarding the expenditure of billions of euros on current and capital projects, regulating social and economic conduct, and delivering services to citizens. Public servants are present at important negotiations and are close witnesses at historic moments.

For example, T. K. Whitaker gives an evocative account of an official lunch in Paris in 1967 at which he accompanied Taoiseach Jack Lynch and Minister for Finance Charles Haughey, who were there to meet French President Charles De Gaulle and Prime Minister George Pompidou (Kenny, 1987). The purpose was to discuss Ireland’s entry to what was then called the ‘common market’. This was the lunch at which Haughey marvelled at the difficulty of ruling a country with 300 varieties of cheese, to which De Gaulle issued an instant correction: ‘*Trois cents quatre-vingt-dix!*’ (‘390!’) After lunch, De Gaulle asked to meet each member of the Irish delegation separately. Whitaker, who was then Secretary of the Department of Finance, recounts:

I was first to be called and, realising the situation was desperate, I decided I had better speak in French. De Gaulle received me very graciously and took me down carefully through the list of difficulties he had about Britain joining the Common Market. He told me why he thought Ireland should seek associate membership ... I drew a deep breath and said, in French, in my best accent, that the Irish had for centuries been trying to – I really meant to say detach ourselves from Britain, but I could not think of the simple word *détacher*. So I said, '*Depuis, des centaines d'années, nous essayons nous arracher à l'Angleterre*'. 'Bon! Bon!', said De Gaulle. This strong phrase 'tearing ourselves away' from England had favourably impressed him. After that I was on the pig's back. He listened very carefully to all I said about our economic development needs.

Stories such as these form part of the narrative of Ireland establishing its own international identity, becoming a member of the European Union and opening up to world trade, a narrative that is captured in detail in the successive volumes of *Documents on Irish foreign policy*.

Arranging the files

In *Lord of the files*, we organised the wealth of material into themes. 'All in a day's work' and 'Serving the public' dealt with the vagaries of work life; 'Directed by the minister' looked at the political-administrative interface; 'In extremis' considered public servants under stress, indeed in danger; 'The joys of administration' and 'The noble language' cast a bemused smile at our semi-religious adherence to administrative practices and officialese; the 'Beaten ranks' and 'Conceptions of worth' illustrated occasional lows and personal epiphanies around vocational value and purpose; 'The literary estate' captured representations of Irish writers in the public service, and of the public service in Irish writing; and 'Making an entrance' and 'Leavetaking' charted the rituals of transition through careers. The story of Whitaker's meeting with De Gaulle would fit in the chapter 'External affairs'.

There are, of course, other ways of framing narratives and experiences. One such is to organise perspectives broadly into internal and external sources, and to subdivide each into positive and negative. This matrix – though not explicitly deployed – underlies the extracts in an informal manner. Clearly, the depth of understanding and the tone of expression differ at any point in time and, indeed, over time. During

the financial crisis, the external narratives, particularly those by various media commentators, focused on criticisms, as they saw things, of stable and even generous public-sector pay and pensions, the shielding of public servants from the effects of economic downturn and the management of austerity measures. This contrasted with complimentary commentary during the preceding boom about public servants being among the architects of the state.

Due to the lack of public commentary platforms for the public service, there was little engagement with either claim. This points to the asymmetry that is inherent in the narratives emanating from external and internal commentators. The former provides frequent contemporary critiques; the latter provides periodic assessments at Oireachtas committees, in official inquiries or, over time, in memoirs, the opening of archives and release of official papers.

After some consideration, we decided to continue with the themes we used previously. Using these thematic chapters as a framework, we consider in what follows what might be included if we were compiling the anthology in 2024.

Replenishing the files

Brendan Drumm, former CEO of the Health Service Executive, provides an informative narrative that illustrates the title of his book *The challenge of change* (2011). The challenge was to reform the fragmentation of health service delivery, and he takes an anonymised patient to illustrate his points (2011, pp. 12–5).

Tom is a 63-year-old man who lives in a town in the west of Ireland. He is an alcoholic, suffers from depression and is separated from his wife. He developed diabetes about 10 years ago and had to have his left leg amputated as a complication of his diabetes. More recently, his eyesight has deteriorated significantly. He lives in social housing and has little contact with his family.

Drumm goes on to describe Tom's medical journey through GP, public health nurse (for daily insulin injections), physiotherapist, occupational therapist (to help him maintain independent living), optician, community psychiatrist or mental health nurse, addiction counsellor, social worker (to help rebuild relationships with his family), and community welfare officer (to ensure he receives his benefit entitlements and is adequately housed).

Drama ensues when Tom collapses in the street. He is brought by ambulance to the nearest general hospital. After numerous treatments involving variations on the abovementioned professional services, he is transferred after twelve days to a Dublin hospital where, over the following week and a half, he receives a further variety of professional services. This is frustrating for all the clinical staff involved and, of course, for Tom.

This narrative was used not only in the book but at conferences and discussions to illustrate inefficiencies in the structure of healthcare delivery, and to initiate movement towards an integrated health system. Drumm's criticism of fragmented delivery is by no means particular to Ireland. As we write, *The Guardian* (Jayanetti, 2024) is reporting that coroners in England and Wales have already issued thirty-six warnings in 2024 over inadequate sharing of National Health Service patient information, with some patients dying because clinicians cannot access important medical records due to 'conflicting IT systems, restricted access, and obstacles to sharing information outside the NHS'. These critical issues, in turn, invite us to reflect back on the trauma inflicted on Ireland's Health Service Executive staff (and patients) when their systems were paralysed during the cyber-attack of May 2021.

Going back to Tom, Drumm (2011, p. 16) continued:

At meetings with professionals and others ... I asked the question: if a man from Mars arrived and observed the structures we use to provide care for someone like Tom, how would he react? ... Everyone agreed that Tom's care was being provided in a haphazard manner. Everyone agreed that his care could be provided more effectively and efficiently using a team-based integrated approach.

Drumm's account would fit well into the chapter 'Serving the public'.

Other accounts emerge and have their power in retrospect. The following extracts from the Maryfield Secretariat Witness Seminar (2015) reveal, after a gap of thirty years, important insider accounts of working for the Irish Government inside Northern Ireland pursuant to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 ('Bunker days: Witness seminar', 2016). This account is from an Irish official, Michael Lillis, preparing to travel to Northern Ireland.

A couple of days before we went up, I was instructed to ... make a new will. I certainly remember doing that. It was the only will

I've ever made at taxpayers' expense. And then when I came back, I was met by a sergeant in the Special Branch who instructed me to come up to the men's room at the back of Iveagh House where ... they had spread some kind of blotting paper on the floor ... and told us to take our shoes and socks off and they put a dye on the blotting paper. We were told to squelch around in the blotting paper for a bit and I said, well, what's this about and he explained that in the event that they couldn't identify us by our teeth, they would identify us by the soles of our feet.

The officials were, in effect, for four days every week, locked into a Spartan prefabricated building located between a Royal Ulster Constabulary vehicle repair shop, a British Army barracks and the headquarters of the Ulster Defence Regiment. Another official based there, Mary Quealy, provided a memorable illustration of a cardinal virtue of public service: stoic attention to duty.

When we were there, we were very, very busy too. We were working hard so we hadn't time to think of being afraid. You just did what you had to do with the machines, the computers, telex machine, everything was new to us and it was all in a day's work.

Yes, the lead is there in the final phrase – this would have gone straight into the chapter named 'All in a day's work'.

A number of political memoirs have been published in the period since 2011 (O'Rourke, 2012; O'Malley, 2014; Yates, 2014; Ross, 2020), all of which give accounts of ministers working with civil servants.

O'Malley wrote about becoming Minister for Justice in 1970 at the age of thirty-one and working with the Secretary General, someone he respected and admired, and who had been in the department since 1927 (2014, p. 63). At the introductory meeting, the Secretary General noted:

'You're my thirteenth Minister.'

'My goodness you have been here a long time,' I replied. I was intent on not being cowed by his longevity in the department.

'Yes, I have,' he said, before adding, 'My first Minister was Kevin O'Higgins – and he was shot, you know.'

'I know that,' I replied.

Both men went on to form a strong and productive relationship. This joins a range of commentaries on the evolution of the pivotal dynamic in departmental life and would join others in the chapter 'Directed by the minister'. Space precludes us from providing further detailed examples here, but we would direct readers to Ivan Yates's description of confronting weighty binders of information on his first day in office (2014, pp. 145–6) and Mary O'Rourke's accounts of dealing with public servants (2012, pp. 92–4).

There have also been a number of memoirs by senior public servants, notably Kevin Cardiff, former Secretary General of the Department of Finance who went on to become a member of the European Court of Auditors, and Maurice O'Connell, also a former Secretary General of the Department of Finance who went on to become Governor of the Central Bank.

Cardiff (2016) gives a participant's account of the financial crisis, the decision to guarantee bank liabilities and the negotiation of the European Union–International Monetary Fund rescue programme. The following account of the crisis meeting in Government Buildings leading to the bank guarantee of 2008 gives a sense of the reality of dealing with decisions of the utmost gravity.

Cardiff was then Second Secretary General of the department, and at various stages on the evening and night of the guarantee, the 'rolling' meeting was attended by the Taoiseach, the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach, other senior officials and advisors at the department, the Minister for Finance, the Secretary General and other senior officials of the Department of Finance, the Governor and other senior officials from the Central Bank, the financial regulator, the Attorney General, a representative from one of the major Dublin-based legal firms and the heads of the two main Irish banks. Under the guarantee which emerged from the overnight meeting, the government pledged to take responsibility, in the event of default, for the liabilities of stricken Irish banks for two years. Cardiff recounts:

I was anxious to be in the room with the Taoiseach – albeit [I was] just about the most 'junior' person for a good deal of the time. It was important that someone be there who had participated in many of the working meetings over the past few days. ... I was nervous – I imagine everyone there was – but also somewhat relieved. At last there was no more wait-and-see. The Taoiseach had called a meeting to make big decisions, his stature

would count with the other players and we would get some direction for action.

I was confident that my team, with the Attorney General's staff of lawyers and parliamentary drafters, could deliver any legislation required very quickly, as we already had prepared draft legislation which could allow for guarantees, special liquidity swap arrangements, nationalisation, direct loans and so forth.

Moreover, if there was a need to apply government money directly, the authorities had a 'fighting fund' of sorts arranged, so that taking cash and fungible securities together, as well as some limited scope to apply the Central Bank balance sheet, we could have many billions of euro ready at very short notice, perhaps as much as €20 billion.

Maurice O'Connell was also involved in major decisions of national significance such as those surrounding the defence of the Irish pound during the currency crisis of 1991–2. As Central Bank Governor, he oversaw the transition to the euro. O'Connell joined the Department of Finance in 1962 and was first assigned to the Personnel section. His personal reminiscences of those early years (2020, p. 69) would fit in the section 'The backward glance':

Among the early files on my desk was one entitled 'The Five-Day Week'. My senior officer, who gave the impression that he knew much about this subject, advised me not to be over-zealous about it. There would, he added, be no five-day working week in our time. The only concession since *Genesis* had been a half day on Saturday and the civil service hierarchy was unlikely to surrender another half day in a hurry.

This simple reminder that unimagined things can, and do, happen provides the perspective in which to consider current and once previously unimagined practices like working from home.

O'Connell (2020, pp. 70–1) continues to provide perspective, which contrasts with the more enlightened perspective of the present, on the role of the department as guardian of the public purse:

Prior to my time, a senior officer was reputed to have given approval for the purchase of *not more* [emphasis added] than nine stations of the cross for the new army barracks in the

Curragh. He was a man of Quaker origin unfamiliar with army needs in this particular instance ...

In another high-principled story, O'Connell noted that:

The Department of Posts and Telegraphs applied on one occasion for a special bicycle allowance for a postman in the southwest who had to cycle 'half-way up a mountain' in the course of his duties. The reply was to the effect that as he could freewheel on the way down, a special payment would not be warranted.

Karina Molloy (2023) has written a brave and important book on the experience of a woman soldier in the Irish army, which would properly command its place in the 'Gender proofing' chapter of the anthology. She recounts several examples of frustrated career advancement, and of harassment. For example, when she initially complained about a lewd image carved into a wooden windowsill, the issue was not addressed. Nor could the Employment Equality Agency investigate because the defence forces were exempt from the Employment Equality Act. However, her representative body successfully pushed the matter (2023, pp. 204–6):

Finally, a notice was sent out warning the soldiers that anyone caught defacing government property would be charged. The problem was defacement of government property, not sexual harassment. The Board of Works painted the offending images until they were concealed.

Where public servants worked under extreme stress and danger, we captured these episodes in the chapter 'In extremis'. Many new and important narratives of this type are emerging from the pandemic, and from the preceding period of austerity. The latter for example, has produced many instances of pressure and resilience. In his St Patrick's Day address to the nation in 2020, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar outlined the likely impact of the global pandemic on Ireland and the policy responses that would be required. He expressed his faith in the health system and healthcare workers. His speech contained the memorable sentence, 'Not all superheroes wear capes, some wear scrubs and gowns'.

Healthcare workers have always generated stories that could easily find their way into the ‘In extremis’ chapter, or indeed ‘The beaten ranks’. The following account in 2017 by an anonymous nurse is no exception:

In a hospital corridor sits a hoist, for lifting patients. It needs a service. Whose job is it to organise this? Nobody knows. It is another great Hospital Mystery. But sure can’t the nurses get together and lift? Literally pull together as a team.

In this divided world, reality is also fractured. You pass a broken piece of essential equipment and you get used to the idea of it, sitting there, redundant. But you do not get used to the idea of using your body in a way that is bad practice. My back hurts. I see the strain, the stiffness and the defeat in colleagues. I refuse to get used to this. But ... when 80-year-olds are left overnight on trolleys like human detritus, when a nurse has one thermometer for a ward of 30, something gets broken inside that worker. (‘A nurse’s world: The minister is coming! The minister is coming!’, 2017).

In the chapter ‘The joys of administration’, we collected examples of the odd, peculiar and eccentric things that periodically crop up. Unidentified flying objects would fall into that category. Documents that came to light in 2023 revealed correspondence to government departments about these objects (Gallagher, 2023). One email sought to draw the government’s attention to what was ‘quite possibly the biggest news in the history of the planet and indeed the human race’. Another requested that the government establish an embassy for extraterrestrials. What a student of public administration can take from these correspondences is not so much the predilections of the population but the inevitable stalling of even the most perfect administrative system. Unsurprisingly, the correspondence passed from the Department of the Taoiseach to the Department of Defence to the Department of Transport and from there back to the Department of Defence. It was clearly a cross-cutting issue.

The one-hundredth anniversary of the Local Government Act 1898, which marks the statutory foundation of the local government system in Ireland, brought forward centenary retrospectives from local authorities across Ireland. Cork County Council’s centenary souvenir publication contained the following extract recounted by J. Casey, a council roadworker, about conditions in the 1920s and 1930s. It would

fit well with the narratives collected in 'Conceptions of worth'. The arduous work described sets a high benchmark for physical labour and acts as a reproof to those of us who casually refer to 'breaking stones' at work:

When the roads were taken over by Cork County Council, any farmer who had a quarry on his land supplied stone. Some of the stone was quarried by the Council workers and was drawn by horse and cart to the roadside where it was broken by hand by the labourers at 2/6 (two shillings and sixpence) per ton. ... The stones were quarried by hand with crowbars and wedges; sometimes the face of the quarry would be bored by a hand drill and sledgehammer, one man turning the drill and the other striking. There were not many compressors at that time.

The stones would be spread by hand in the winter months and drawn by horse and cart and binded with clay dug with a pickaxe. Work began at 8am and finished at 6pm, except in wintertime it might finish at 5pm. There was no 10 o'clock break in those days and you also worked a half day on Saturday. (Casey, 1999).

The concluding chapter of the anthology is 'The literary estate', a collection of pieces from literary writers both outside and inside the public service. Among the former was Samuel Beckett. We might now include his splenetic letter written to Thomas McGreevy in 1937 in which he felt he was being 'persecuted' by the Gardaí as a result of dangerous driving (Fehsenfeld & Overbeck, 2009). To say the very least, his statement that 'There is no animal I loathe more profoundly than a Civic Guard' lacks balance. His sense of grievance was posthumously salved in 2014 with the commissioning of the Irish Naval Service offshore patrol vessel L. E. Samuel Beckett.

Another author, external to the public service, who is worthy of inclusion in the anthology but inadvertently overlooked is Paul Durcan. He captures the siren-call, not audible to all, of working in the public service in his whimsical poem 'The married man who fell in love with a semi-state body' (2009/1978). The protagonist in the poem is Ted Rice. Ted is a respectable married man who leaves his job as the manager of a city-centre pub to become an executive in a fictitious semi-state body, An Bord Ól, promoting the Irish drinks industry:

So much did Ted grow to love the Semi-State Body,
So hard he worked for her,

So heroically he hullaballoo'd for her,

.....

That he began to think of her as The Woman in his Life ...

The most important discovery we made, though, was the richness of material from writers who worked in the public service for their full career or part thereof. Returning to them is always rewarding. We might now include in the 'Leavetaking' chapter Dennis O'Driscoll's glum assessment (1994):

You will slave to pension day

Eluded by advancement, satisfaction, wealth ...

O'Driscoll, as seen in his poetry on administrative life, such as *The bottom line* from which the above quotation is taken, was a sensitive observer of public service life and what we might call 'Homo administrans'. Thankfully, he did advance in his civil service career, moving from the Department of Justice to the Revenue Commissioners, and balancing, however awkwardly, his administrative and creative work. At O'Driscoll's funeral in 2012, eulogist Seamus Heaney noted the influence of O'Driscoll's career on his poetry and said, 'Those years in the administration of the nation's affairs bred in him the wisdom that comes from bearing heavy responsibility and taking important decisions' (Heaney, 2012).

We would return also to poet Thomas Kinsella, who worked as a civil servant in the Department of Finance; a photo portrait of him still hangs on the wall in the Upper Merrion Street offices. Kinsella, in his professional duties as Private Secretary, reported to T. K. Whitaker. John Horgan (2018) recounts that Whitaker once asked Kinsella to recommend some books to read on a long official trip. Kinsella made what he thought was an interesting selection. Whitaker, on his return, gracious as ever, thanked Kinsella but asked that in future the selection might be 'not so racy'.

However mischievous Kinsella might, or might not, have been, he never found any 'clash' between the administration of the nation's affairs and his creative life. 'I've found that my mental state when composing a particularly difficult minute,' he told an American interviewer about working in the Department of Finance, 'is not unlike the process of writing a poem' (O'Driscoll, 2001). Features of his civil service work, such as 'alertness, openness, organisation', actually helped his writing.

The roll-call of writers who spent part or all their careers within the Irish public service – ‘the biggest patron of the arts since the Medici’ – is an impressive one. A partially-exhaustive list includes: Ciaran Carson, Leo Cullen, Denis Devlin, Padraic Fallon, Brian Friel, Rónán Hession, Valentin Iremonger, Brendan Kennelly, Thomas Kinsella, Hugh Leonard, Michael Longley, Thomas McCarthy, Hugh McFadden, John McGahern, Thomas MacGreevy, Seosamh MacGrianna, Bryan MacMahon, Francis MacManus, Maire Mhac an tSaoi, Conor Cruise O'Brien (as Donat O'Donnell), Máirtín Ó Cadhain, Frank O'Connor, Máirtín Ó Direáin, Dennis O'Driscoll, Roibeárd Ó Faracháin, Joseph O'Neill, Brian O'Nolan (as Flann O'Brien *and* Myles na gCopaleen *and* Cruiskeen Lawn), Seán Ó Ríordáin, Richard Power, Donal Ryan, Richard Ryan and Mervin Wall.

We have been enriched, not least professionally, by reading these authors and curating selected extracts in *Lord of the files*. We are conscious from reading public service documents and academic assignments and dissertations in the Institute of Public Administration that there are many others capable of published work that would grace any anthology.

Phantom files

The cliché about the fisherman obsessing about the biggest fish that got away holds true too for the anthologist. There were countless stories about schemes and pranks, about wily politicians and quick-witted civil servants that were hugely revelatory – and some that made our jaws drop – but we simply could not use them because they were not written down or published. These we may consider as phantom files. It was hard to watch them disappear down the current of oral testimony. Yet, we will continue to keep an eye out for them; perhaps they will surface one day in memoir or biography.

There were other fascinating scenarios that were in print form, but their presentation lacked the narrative completeness required for the anthology. How great, for example, it would have been to include a tense and slow-dripping account of three lighthouse keepers on Tuskar Rock in March 1957 closely monitoring the ominous course of an unexploded Second World War mine as it drifted towards them on the tide. They must have considered the fact that a drifting mine had struck the rock over fifteen years earlier, killing the assistant keeper. Their account would have gone into ‘In extremis’ or, perhaps, into ‘All

in a day's work' if they had passed such high anxiety service off with stoic nonchalance. Alas, all we had was a brief and perfunctory newspaper note ('Mine drifting near Tuskar', 1957).

These incorporeal phantom files linger on the perimeter of our consciousness, sometimes playing tricks with our memory and leaving us in doubt about whether we actually included them or not. But this is not the place to dwell on such phantoms. To borrow Gabriel Conroy's lines from James Joyce's wintry and ghostly novella, *The dead*: 'we have all of us living duties and living affections which claim, and rightfully claim, our strenuous endeavours' (Joyce, 1997/1914). Our attention is with the well-made narratives that made it into the anthology, and those narratives that are clearly contenders for a future edition.

Conclusion: Recovering the files

We are delighted to have the opportunity to provide this coda to *Lord of the files*. The flow of compelling, published work continues, and it is interesting to dip an anthologist's toe once again into the current.

As was the case before, we have included here just a small selection of work; we do not, for example, have space to delve into the trove of interesting material in the successive volumes of *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, which have been published since our compilation was made. And, of course, the flow of material will continue as new national and international issues develop, as ministers come and go, as departments get restructured, and as public service reform rolls on. And all this, as ever, will happen with a human dimension.

The unique personal and professional experiences such as those we have anthologised in our chronicle, affects how readers encounter, study and understand public service and public servants. It is good to celebrate the positive, and at times transformative, mark they have left on Irish social, political, civic, artistic and economic life.

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