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Assessing government communication – A roundtable

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Introduction

As part of this special issue on 'Communicating Government', a roundtable of practitioners was convened to consider some of the broad issues raised by the authors in their respective articles. Moderated by Kevin Rafter, those involved were Elizabeth Canavan, assistant secretary general at the Department of the Taoiseach, whose responsibilities include the Government Information Service (GIS); Fiach Mac Conghail, CEO of the Digital Hub Development Agency, a former independent member of Seanad Éireann and Director of the Abbey Theatre; and Derek McDowell, a former deputy government press secretary who previously served for fifteen years as a member of the Oireachtas (as a Labour Party TD and senator).

The discussion below was undertaken by email in May 2022, a format which allowed the participants greater reflection than might have been possible in a live roundtable engagement (either in-person or virtual). The three participants have considerable first-hand experience of the Irish political and governmental systems and a deep understanding as practitioners of the role of political communication, in its broadest definition, in government and civil servant structures.

Among the issues the participants were asked to consider were government communications during the 2020–22 Covid-19 crisis (and a number of related issues that emerge from the Covid-19 communications strategy, including the importance of apolitical and non-partisan leadership in providing information) and the communication structures a twenty-first-century governmental system might need to adopt. Their responses – summarised in the concluding section – touched upon issues including civil service–politician relations, crisis communications, the role of social media and the place of experts in information provision to the public.

Discussion

Kevin Rafter: Our world has come through an extraordinary period which has impacted on all areas of life. Governments played a central role in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. The provision of timely, accurate and accessible information to citizens was important from the start of the crisis in March 2020. Considering Ireland specifically – but also referencing other jurisdictions, should you wish – how would you assess that communication response? And, a linked question, what impact – if any – do you think the Covid-19 response will have on how governments communicate with citizens beyond the crisis?

Fiach Mac Conghail: In March 2020, from both a personal and professional perspective, my overriding concerns were health and money. The government had to deal with these two major drivers. Our lives and our sustainable near future. How to communicate this pervasive anxiety rippling and roaring through Irish society at such speed. I'm not a psychologist but I do remember two distinct guide ropes through the early days of the pandemic – Leo Varadkar's speech that early morning in Washington and the ESRI (Economic and Social Research Institute) 'public-airways' reporting on the monitoring of people's behavioural reaction to the restrictions.

I remember Liz [Canavan] being on the podium on television. I listened carefully as she developed in us a sense of trust in the process. I have the feeling that the government and society were listening to each other. I recall David McWilliams writing about 'helicopter money' and learning from the mistakes of the way we managed the banking and financial crisis [post 2008].[1] I think we learned from the previous public crisis.

The emergence of NPHET (National Public Health Emergency Team) 'out of nowhere' took us a while to acclimatise to, and the official language between NPHET and government in the first phase was extremely focused and collaborative. RTÉ, as a public service broadcaster, thrived and served society well during this initial phase. The public trusted government's messaging at the time and the public service broadcasting platforms. As a population, we set aside, for a while, our sense of personal liberty and privacy rights in return for government to take unprecedented control and invasive action to protect us all. This was an extraordinary process, and the constant and evolving communication from government with the support of the opposition worked. Our society was in a panic, and we wanted to hear a singular, authoritative voice as we tried to 'catch up' with the implications of Covid-19.

How government will communicate to citizens in the future in the context of what was learned during Covid-19 is complex. The crisis in many ways was an example of non-political communication or a pan-political process. All pillars of government, the Oireachtas and public administration were conjoined with a shared goal of communicating how to manage this crisis in face of evolving information and facts. It wasn't until we understood the virus that government's communication process, naturally, required more nuance.

Derek McDowell: During the tenure of the 2011–16 [Fine Gael–Labour] government I worked in various guises in the Tánaiste's Office. I remember clearly a conversation one morning with a colleague who had observed a roundtable session hosted by a polling company the previous evening. The purpose of the session was to sound out the views of a selection of 'ordinary people' to various

[1] David McWilliams, an economist and commentator. He used the term 'helicopter money' at the outset of the Covid-19 crisis to argue for central banks to give 'free money' to the public. See https://davidmcwilliams.ie/why-central-bank-must-give-everyone-free-money-right-now/

policies and also to get an idea of their assessment of the Labour Party [in government]. This colleague was genuinely shocked and felt, very strongly, that measured against [the session's] stated purpose, the whole exercise had been a waste of time. Not only did most of the people at the session know very little about politics, they also didn't care.

The fact that very many people are only tangentially connected to politics and policy discussion informs the way government goes about disseminating information. There are two main purposes to most government information: to inform the public and to win or retain votes. Anyone can access government information but in practice only a minority does. Government knows this and, consciously or otherwise, targets information at those who vote, or those who might be directly affected by a particular policy.

The Covid-19 pandemic upended all of these presumptions. While normally government struggles to be heard – and often isn't – the pandemic created an audience which was avidly seeking information. And not just information: the public wanted reassurance, leadership and in many cases – especially at the early stages – instruction. Later on, as people became more opinionated, they also wanted to hear genuine debate about options for dealing with the challenges of the pandemic.

Most of the initial response was effective. Speeches to the nation by then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar were concise, authoritative, empathetic (even apocalyptic in tone). But it was clear from March 2020 that a 'politicians only' approach to communications would not work and risked losing public confidence. Politicians simply didn't have the expertise to respond with sufficient speed and authority to a fast-changing situation. The response was daily press conferences headed up by the Chief Medical Officer (Tony Holohan) and his deputy (Ronan Glynn).

This worked well, even very well at the start of the crisis. The experts ran the show. They had the information and, in time, they got to know the requirements of particular journalists. The media was quiescent. There were no hard questions. The outcome was exactly what government wanted – a sense that 'we are all in this together'. Politicians continued to give interviews, as did Paul Reid, CEO of the Health Service Executive, but the medical experts did the heavy-lifting.

It was inevitable that this situation would change. As journalists became better informed, and as lockdown fatigue set in, the

questioning became more difficult. Tensions between different sides in government became more apparent to the public. The consensus response dissipated. To my mind, the fracturing of the consensus was inevitable.

I also think the pandemic exposed the limitations of social media in communicating sometimes complex information. Social media is much better for short, sharp messaging – and government messaging often wasn't. Moreover, Twitter audiences are self-selecting. Many journalists were cooperative in providing links to government information but most people don't have many journalists on their Twitter feed.

By contrast, social media is great for spreading disinformation, precisely because it is easily expressed in simple terms. The anti-vax campaign is a case in point. It was, and still is, pretty well impossible for government or public health authorities to combat the anti-vaxers on social media. What I find interesting is the way government decided to deal with the anti-vax campaigners in the mainstream media. In simple terms they ignored them and their message (or at least they pretended to ignore them). Accentuate the positive!

As we know, the 'keep it positive' messaging worked, in that Irish vaccination rates were higher than in most other countries. The same strategy wasn't anything like as effective in two other countries of which I had some experience. In both South Africa (where I lived for about half the duration of the pandemic – not entirely by choice; I just didn't fancy spending €4,000 to spend two weeks self-isolating in hotel accommodation in Dublin!) and Germany (I follow German media and visit often) the respective governments also tried to persuade by positive messaging about the benefits of vaccination, with much less success than in Ireland.

Elizabeth Canavan: The first thing to say is that the government's communications response was heavily informed by the public health evidence relating to communication in times of pandemics. This emphasised the role of communication and, in particular, the need for regular, authoritative, trusted, transparent and up-to-date information about what was happening and how we were dealing with it. It was understood that this would be vital in reassuring the public, maintaining their confidence and cooperation, and avoiding a breakdown in social cohesion.

That background informed the development of various aspects of our approach to communications on the pandemic. Some approaches were quite traditional, and others were new or improved (e.g. use of social media and more evidence-informed use of channels and metrics on reach). However, the main difference was that, regardless of the topic, if it was Covid-related, it was held together at the centre – and all the players bought into that. Other aspects of the approach (including civil servants leading out on key aspects of the information-giving) upended expectations on the role of officials and the role of ministers in engaging directly with the public.

Time will tell – and others will probably determine – but, on the face of it, I think that multistranded approach and central alignment of effort contributed to high degrees of compliance with restrictions as well as engagement with the vaccination programme. It also generated a single team #ForUsAll mentality. This reflected the community spirit and solidarity – and the public responded to and reflected back this solidarity in their behaviour, volunteering and other activities. In terms of our objective in the use of communications to help mitigate the impact of Covid, I think we were successful.

As regards the impact on government communications more generally, it is a little difficult to tell. Undoubtedly, the experience, the tools, techniques, structures and processes which were utilised have hugely contributed to improving the in-house communications capacity which is available to support government. It has probably copper-fastened the importance of good-quality public information in supporting the implementation of policy which involves behaviour change or a response at the level of the individual.

It is also worth noting that we also utilised a variety of tools to better understand where the 'public mind' was [during the crisis] and how people were responding. We shared this information across government and published the details – for example, the Amárach surveys[2] (which the Department of Health commissioned) and the behavioural analysis commissioned from the ESRI.[3]

I believe the value of some fairly new infrastructure (like gov.ie) and processes for better measurement and assessment of communication activities/impact will all endure [post Covid]. Indeed, we have applied some of them in terms of the GIS's role in

[2] See, for example, https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/6b4401-view-the-amarach-public-opinion-survey

[3] See, for example, https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/a7ee4-see-the-results-of-the-social-activity-measure-behavioural-study/

coordinating communications in relation to Ireland's response to the war in Ukraine. But [we have to acknowledge] that the Covid-19 crisis was an extraordinary time, and some of the measures were extraordinary. If we were to have similar impact in similar circumstances, we probably need to reserve certain things for similar situations and scenarios (e.g. Taoisigh addressing the nation – or civil servants going 'front of house' on government policy or decisions).

There is also a need to be extremely mindful of the cost of communications being justified in terms of the common good and the public interest. I think broadly it would be agreed that it was justified in the circumstances – particularly if we attribute compliance with restrictions or vaccination rates, in any way, to the quality of communication. However, scrutiny of expenditure of public funds on communications has not gone away. It will and should continue, and that means that there is a high bar. Great care has to be taken in expanding some of the approaches taken during the pandemic to other topics or government priorities to ensure they fully align with all of the rules on the use of public money, as well as code-of-conduct considerations.

Rafter: I would like to talk about an issue you have all referenced – the role of leadership. We expect to see a high standard of objectivity, openness and honesty in communication about government activities. We also expect the information provided about subjects such as Covid-19 or climate change or immigration to be reliable, balanced and truthful. There is a need for this work to be apolitical and non-partisan. How is that communication strategy achieved by government and civil servant leaders in an environment where every policy decision seems to generate a political debate, and in our 24/7 social media world those debates have become even more contested?

McDowell: 'You are entitled to your own opinion but you are not entitled to your own facts' – it's a great political one-liner; a put-down intended to bring an end to debate by essentially suggesting that the opposing argument is nonsense or lies, or both. Of course, life and politics are not so simple. The line between fact and opinion is very grey and sometimes, actually frequently, it is difficult to distinguish one from the other.

There is a cohort of people for whom facts are irrelevant. Their views – one might say prejudices – are so entrenched that they care little, if at all, about the relevant facts. So, for example, those who

firmly believe that immigrants are 'taking Irish jobs' will hold firmly to that view even if the evidence suggests otherwise. Climate change deniers (or at least a lot of them) will continue to deny that humans are responsible for climate change, despite the myriad evidence that we are in fact responsible. And, anti-vaxers are happy to ignore the fact that much of what they say is simply wrong.

Such people are beyond the reach of government information campaigns, however they are structured. But these people are capable of exercising influence over a frighteningly large number of others – so it is vital that their messages are countered. This cannot be done directly. To try to do so risks giving oxygen to the messages which government is trying to counter. In any event, you cannot really debate with someone whose only response to inconvenient facts is to brand the truth as 'fake news'.

During the pandemic I cannot remember a single occasion when someone in government debated directly with the opponents of the vaccination programme. The government addressed 'people with understandable concerns' in a positive way – and at all times emphasising the benefits of the vaccination programme rather than directly countering some of the myths perpetrated by its opponents. In this, it was in my opinion successful or at least as successful as could reasonably be expected. As Fiach and Liz have said in previous contributions, the medium is at least as important as the message, and the use of senior civil servants and medical experts was a hugely important contributor to establishing trust.

This touches on a debate which has been going on for many years without clear resolution – just where is the line of responsibility between politicians and senior civil servants? The simple answer is that civil servants advise and politicians decide. Public servants do their work behind closed doors and politicians articulate the views of government in the public arena and are accountable to the public for the consequences of their actions and policy.

But everyone who has ever worked in government knows that this is a gross over-simplification. Most civil servants above a certain grade effectively make policy all the time, often with only a cursory regard for their political masters. Conversely, it is perfectly possible for a minister to serve in government for a long time without taking any real initiatives of his or her own. Most government policymaking comprises a minister signing off on a policy which has been largely dictated by the civil service, with active engagement reserved only for those issues which are considered politically sensitive or which entail service delivery.

The system has served us well but it is not without difficulty. It means that a lot of policy debate is done behind closed doors, involving senior civil servants who are often unknown to the public. In recent years we have seen some senior civil servants engage in policy debate in public but these interventions are still rare enough. Our system also leaves a reality gap in terms of accountability. The law specifies that secretaries general are largely accountable for what happens in their departments but usually it is the politicians who take the credit when something goes well and take the rap when it doesn't.

The pandemic response was a real-life test of our governance system. In the first instance NPHET communications were used to inform people of the facts, to encourage compliance with restrictions and to assuage the fear that many people felt. But over time it became clear that NPHET was more than just advisory. The public perception was, and still is, that NPHET was running the show. Its members weren't just advising government: they were, in effect, making the vital policy decisions with little real option for government to do anything other than tweak the response. Mostly, government acquiesced in this. But not all the time – and then suddenly the tensions between different arms of government were laid bare, and for many people it jarred. Personally, I don't have a problem with intra-government tensions being exposed to the public. Often, it is quite a good thing. But at a time of national emergency it was something of a luxury, arguably one we couldn't afford.

The pandemic was in many ways exceptional, not least in that it required policymaking on the hoof. Our system isn't really good at that and the pandemic response was successful largely because the usual rules of responsibility and accountability were bent in large measure, sometimes close to breaking point. On the flip side, the fact that the usual methods could be adapted so quickly is a real positive in itself.

Mac Conghail: It is an important dynamic that both politicians and civil servants are necessary parts of the public policy cycle. Other actors are involved too. Policy development and delivery has many owners and often its roles are reversed as to who develops and who delivers. In my experience and observations, impartial civil servants and politicians understand each other's motivations. They have different audiences and different stakeholders to manage.

I have come across civil servants who recognise the difficulty in communicating a new issue/policy/bill because the political 'backyard' of the elected minister is more complex. However, I'm surprised at

how most middle-ranking civil servants have no patience or understanding of this. In Gary Murphy's book on Charles Haughey,[4] he quoted Haughey's first directives to his newly appointed private secretary – 'The first priority is my re-election, second is to make sure that you look after sympathetically representations from Fianna Fáil TDs and Senators'.

In terms of any communication strategy on any issue, the fundamentals have never changed. It may be more nuanced and sophisticated in terms of how you can segment your audience and communication strategy. We heard a lot of views from the respective leaders of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael at their parliamentary party meetings during the pandemic and the opening-up of society. This was communicating to the grassroots and may have been at odds with the formal government communication but perhaps just as necessary. Audience segmentation is necessary in any contemporary communication strategy and this can lead to multiple and nuanced messaging. Who delivers the good news and the bad news? If a minister leaves all the good and essential news to the administrative system it will take away from potential credit the minister may deserve or want in terms of getting 're-elected'.

Canavan: This question has hit on one of the greatest challenges facing governments and civil servants all over the world right now. So I will not suggest that I can give anything close to a definitive answer to the question. There are several theses in this one! The question refers to both government and civil servant leaders as regards communication strategy and also the need for the work to be apolitical and non-partisan. I think I would start by making a distinction between government and the civil service as well as querying whether government is ever viewed as non-partisan. The question mentioned Covid-19 but also climate and immigration – communicating on the former, which was an imminent risk to 'life and limb', as compared to other policy topics is inevitably different.

Government communications in a crisis/emergency such as Covid or even one-off short events like major storms requires a few things as part of its strategy, including *a focus on facts* – as real-time as possible; *transparency* – including about uncertainty, complexity and 'current best guesses'; *assurance* – what's happening, what's planned, a sense it is 'under control'; and *acknowledgement and engagement* –

[4] Murphy, Gary. (2021). *Haughey*. Dublin: Gill Books.

demonstrably listening to and reflecting on how whatever is going on is impacting on individuals or the population at large. It is also important to be aware of, and in a position to counter, disinformation.

At times of crisis, government and political figures front-out the big policy decisions while civil and public servants explain technical details. Everyone (political and officials) needs to support, coordinate and align communications in order to be successful. Civil and public servants must support the political leadership under whose direction they work. The strategy has to operate in consort. We saw this during the pandemic. We have also seen similar roles taken on by other public servants in the context of other disease situations (foot and mouth) as well as storms in recent years.

Government communications in terms of achieving longer-term policy goals has some of the same principles but is inevitably different. Government, by its nature, is not apolitical in its policy choices even when those choices are generally agreed and undisputed. Therefore, there is an underlying presumption when any government speaks on its own behalf (and I mean members of the cabinet or the government parties communicating on political decisions). It is difficult for them to be seen as (or for them to be) agenda-free and not in some way partisan even if they are being intentionally reliable, balanced and truthful.

This brings me back to my list – *facts are disputed*, even more challenging when we are talking about understanding correlation/causation when considering longer-term policy issues and never more so; *transparency about uncertainty* can be utilised to suggest there is a 'perfect' solution which we should wait for, or to pick off policy choices as being unproven; *assurance* – what's happening, what's planned.

Current debate very often raises disputes about the real motivation behind government policy and/or disputes about whether it is feasible or how it will be funded. In these situations, I think there are different elements to the strategy. Starting at the end, traditionally communications is something that was considered at the moment of launching a policy – and is always led politically. Civil and public servants will, of course, undertake 'technical' briefings [for the media] from time to time and they are required to be accountable to the Oireachtas at more senior levels. Officials are also bound to present government policy – factually explaining existing policies as outlined by ministers/government. This is an inevitable part of communications. However, in these latter scenarios they are not to discuss policy alternatives or allow themselves to be drawn into debating the merits of particular policy decisions.

Separately, experts can play a role but they are generally outside of the system or are 'outsider/insiders' (I'm thinking about Prof. Tom Keane in the Second Cancer Strategy, where the move to centres of excellence was achieved as he helped convince the public that this was in their best interest).[5] These are seen as working with the system but not 'of the system' so they have no 'skin in the game' and therefore more likely to be objective. It is increasingly difficult to find objective voices (or those who are accepted as such). At times there are 'experts' galore and even commentators (expert in one field) opining on topics they are not expert in. We also see far more celebrity experts who have strong social media followings who can both wittingly and unwittingly change the direction of policy debates.

Therefore, in my view, a government's communications strategy now has to start much earlier. It has to be embedded within the policy debate/option appraisal in an engagement/dialogue with key stakeholders *and* the wider public as part and parcel of the policy development process. The strategy has to try to deepen the quality of the debate and draw in views and voices at a much earlier stage. For policy proposals to survive contact with the 'real world', governments have to be able to leverage engagement, feedback and views of stakeholders and the public they drew on during the policy development process. That communication/engagement has to be deep – evidence is presented, debated and options are appraised.

I have seen how such an approach has not made the challenges go away, but it has allowed the system to get on with investing and building capacity towards policy goals with less noise and less diversions for perceived 'quick fixes'. Another example might be the citizens' assembly on very 'hot' topics (although not all topics are suitable), which allowed ongoing, open access to the media on the process of engagement with the public – building up understanding over time, before the big question was put to the public, as with the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution.

The strategy has to be to communicate as part of a policy dialogue and the aim is more about building legitimacy along the way. This can then be a bulwark against later debate, misinformation and overly

[5] Prof. Tom Keane was appointed founding director of the National Cancer Control Programme in 2007, with the goal of implementing the National Cancer Strategy. For information on the National Cancer Strategy, see https://www.oireachtas.ie/ga/debates/debate/committee_on_the_future_of_healthcare/2016-10-19/2/

simplistic analyses of the policy problems/solutions. Even then, it won't always work. But if policy has general acceptance, it is [at that point that] you can communicate around implementation and behaviour change.

Rafter: In our discussion thus far the issue of 'misinformation' has been mentioned a number of times. We know that many policy areas depend on different types of expertise – and, in particular, scientific expertise. Some scholars have made the case for new institutions to integrate scientific and other expertise alongside political decision-making. There is less clarity on what form any new institution might take to lessen/reduce the tension between democracy and expertise. Liz Canavan mentioned the role of a platform like gov.ie in getting accurate information into the public domain. But are there other communication structures that a twenty-first-century governmental system might consider?

McDowell: I hear it said regularly, and often carelessly, that government needs to engage with the people through social media, that being where most people, certainly most young people, interact with news. I am not sure about this. All my social media feeds are news feeds. But most people do not use social media primarily for news, or at least not news in the sense of current affairs. They use these media [platforms] to stay in touch with friends, to receive or exchange information about interests, and to follow sports stars or celebrities. They may well spend time viewing repeats of sports events or quirky videos on YouTube, or listening to bloggers looking to promote perfume or clothes. That is not to say that information of the kind that government wants to circulate will not occasionally butt in. It might well do.

Trying to insert information into a fundamentally different environment isn't easy. There have been exceptions. Social media was effectively used during the Marriage Equality and Eighth Amendment referendums. And so, too, to a degree during the Covid-19 crisis. But as a general rule I am cautious about the use of social media by government.

The main reason for this is simple. Government is not a trusted messenger and, of course, social media platforms are not especially trusted as media of propaganda. Put the two together and you have a problem. Also messages initiated by government are treated with 'hot hands'. Evidence from South Africa (where, as I mentioned

previously, I spent some of the Covid-19 period) suggested that people who saw a piece encouraging them to get vaccinated were quite receptive to the message, but were very unlikely to retweet or share. So that even if people are themselves open to particular messaging they were reluctant to be associated with it (almost certainly because of its original source). So my feeling – and it is just my feeling – is that government must make information as accessible as possible online, but to use push ads, targeted or not, risks a frosty reaction from at least some recipients. Conversely, if the message can be mediated through intermediaries with lower trust deficits (experts, celebrities, sports stars, etc.), the chances of success are higher.

I'd like to add a few words about the 'experts issue' in government communications. Policy debate benefits from the engagement of as many people and organisations as possible. Sometimes information sources are so diffuse and information itself is so complex that a reliable source of objective information is a real benefit. Many government departments now put a lot of information into the public domain on their own websites, certainly far more than would have been readily available twenty years ago.

There are also a host of other bodies providing information in the governmental sphere (other than the civil service proper). Many are in the regulatory field. This is not itself a bad thing but may, or may not, colour their engagement in debate. I'm thinking of the various ombudsmen, the regulators and so on. All have a role in providing information and stimulating debate alongside their regulatory roles. There is clearly some scope for additional infrastructure along the lines of the ESRI, whose primary purpose is to support policy debate but which has over many years asserted its independence, often with [research] papers critical of government policy.

I would like to come back to a point which Liz made previously. Citizens' assemblies have a clear role to play in shining the light on thorny issues which defy normal parliamentary and even extra-parliamentary debate. Neutrality is definitely a case in point. Iconoclasm needs drastic action!

There was a previous reference to the GIS, which I think I can usefully comment upon [having served as deputy government press secretary]. Coalition government [which has been the norm in Ireland since 1989] has made the job of the GIS much more complex. In earlier times the GIS effectively donned the colour of the shirt of one-party governments but life has become much more complicated in recent times.

Today, government ministers will usually have a politically appointed press advisor as well as a departmental infrastructure. Usually, they work well together, but not always. The principals in government will also have multiple special advisors whose role often strays into media relations. The trouble for the GIS is that many advisors see their role as the promotion of particular parties or ministers rather than the promotion of government per se. Needless to say, individual parties in government and ministers see things differently. I think this comes back to what Fiach called 'audience segmentation'.

It was this dissipation of message which led to the establishment of the ill-fated Strategic Communications Unit (SCU). The stated purpose was to streamline communications. In effect it was also looking to centralise control of communications in the Taoiseach's Office. Objectively, this makes sense and I'm sure it must have been very appealing. But politically the SCU didn't fly. I think because the SCU was set up by a single-party government, albeit a minority one with the participation of independent TDs, is not coincidental. It would have been almost impossible for agreement on such a plan to be reached between those involved in a multi-party coalition. Coherent messaging is a great aspiration. But the voices of minority parties in government must also be heard.

Canavan: All political decision-making should be guided by expert advice and it usually is. Many of those experts are within the system and they advise ministers every day of the week. Evidence-informed policymaking is demanded within the system and if that in-depth expertise isn't available in-house, it is resourced through partnerships with experts, academia, whether through procurement, research grants, in-sourcing or otherwise. We don't always have *all* the evidence or data we need but we are getting better and better at it. It is a well-understood and embedded aspect of how we advise within the system.

However, what we know about policymaking is that research and evidence doesn't give you decisions. In fact, sometimes it doesn't even give you a definitive direction – there are always options or 'degrees of …' to any policy design. Secondly, increasingly, and I think this is the strength of democracy, the public have a view and political decision-making has to be seen as legitimate. So the views of the public matter – they give their authority or, indeed, they don't, and that has to inform political decision-making. In addition to that, evidence sometimes tells you 'what?' (or the direction of travel) but it often

doesn't tell you 'how?', so another aspect to the decision-making has to be the feasibility. So we might like a system from another country which looks 'best in class', except they don't have our delivery structure, they don't have our laws, they don't have our constitution and they don't have our culture. So, it isn't a direct line from 'expert/science' to decision.

It is undoubtedly the case that access to information and knowledge, and the potential to engage in debate by the public – in a relatively unmediated way – makes the public more informed, more inquiring and more demanding than a generation ago. Experts and non-experts can opine in a variety of media for free and in a relatively unchallenged way. Governments have to respond to that changed context.

In my view, that means we have to build up the expertise, public engagement and debates on feasibility as discrete elements as part of the advice-giving to government and build it into the policy design/decision-making processes. That means greater and deeper public consultation/debate on these issues in advance – building social licence for decisions, greater exposition of the complexity and challenges, and better engagement with the delivery system (whether state, non-state or public as actors are required to implement the policy). The 'science' provided by experts doesn't have to be debunked or ignored or hidden away; quite the contrary – it should be up front. But these other factors are legitimate too, if we want to have policy that we can implement and that will work.

From government's point of view, the greater the transparency about the process, the stronger the engagement along the way and the clearer the public debate about complexity are the best 'defence' against any perceived tension between democracy and expertise. In my view, this means that rather than thinking in terms of traditional or even modern communications media/platforms, government's best strategy is to focus on transparency and embrace expertise – scientific and otherwise – within the process. That's not novel – it happens already to a greater or lesser extent. It is something that is getting more and more embedded and more sophisticated.

Modern governments have to continue to improve that engagement and dialogue, it seems to me, and do that more consistently. Having a platform such as gov.ie provides a single 'gateway' and has the potential to bring greater transparency and consistency around those processes on big policy questions. However, it is the work that is done by departments, with their stakeholder groups and delivery partners

and experts of all kinds, that makes this work. I think that is my answer to the question as to what government should focus on to manage any perceived tensions.

The demand for modern media is to survive. It is not my area of expertise but I observe that to achieve attention seems to create more of a trend towards reductive, provocative headlines, 'hard case' stories (as we say – which make 'bad law') and purposefully dichotomist views (a set of black-and-white arguments). I understand the dynamic which causes this (including our decreasing attention span as we scroll through newsfeeds/emails/social media). But it doesn't make for considered or quality debate on complex issues.

Social media allows these features to be amplified in a way which is certainly not representative, and over time there can be a 'Chinese whisper' effect as the statements or arguments get increasingly polarised. Even if there was some nuance/depth in the original article or comment, within hours that is reduced to a black-and-white – and often provocative – 'take'. Government can engage through these platforms to signpost, redirect, but its expectations here need to be realistic in terms of 'resolving' any tensions between democracy/expertise.

It is also worth saying, the choice of 'experts', and indeed their motivation in participating in public debate, is not value-free. We saw during the Covid-19 crisis the wide variety of views from all sorts of scientific experts – they didn't agree with one another frequently. Evidence is not 'fact' and can also be misused to present alternative views. We also saw the phenomenon of 'experts' in one field becoming such celebrities that they were being asked for opinions in all sorts of areas [outside their area of expertise].

Mac Conghail: There does seem to be several working strands of government that may end up providing a broad but sustainable base layer of trust and coherence to the work of government. It is not quite orchestrated. Firstly, the role of deliberative democracy, and in particular the various citizens' assemblies, as mentioned by Derek, has had an extraordinary impact on how citizens and politicians can interact with evidence and data to tackle difficult or complex decisions. In contemporary democracy how citizens remain informed and receive data and opinion from experts (scientific or not), particularly as all news-sharing platforms are so diverse and segmented, is critical. But it can be achieved. I saw it up front with 'We

the Citizens'.[6] The interesting early reaction was the suspicion or nervousness from journalists. As if another layer or nuance was added to how to disseminate political communication.

Secondly, the introduction of the pre-legislative scrutiny mechanism is an important part of the policymaking process now. Democracy is always evolving and the traditional big-party approach to introducing and driving through legislation without deliberation, consultation and engagement is changing. It can tackle misinformation to a forensic level. Research is required to see how effective this scrutiny is in terms of ministers taking advice. However, is it another form of communication that is available to tackle misinformation. It may not be a favourite for civil servants either as it adds to the policy development cycle and change can be challenging when under pressure from ministers who want to fast-track legislation.

Thirdly, another strand that interests me is the role of IGEES (Irish Government Economic Evaluation Service) in tackling mis-information and its medium- and long-term data collection process. Again, this strand of experts is internal to government but theoretically can support the clarity around new policy development and how it might supply new evidence. The ESRI, which Derek also mentioned, is another outside/inside entity that can deliver on the 'expert actor'.

All of these layers can be complex in communicating a direct message, which is, of course, what government has to do. A Strategic Communications Unit should be able to support this and offer the appropriate platform to share incremental and deliberative and necessary information to citizens. I really like the rebranding of gov.ie and the one-voice/tone which is best positioned to communicate, and which did so during the pandemic.

The challenge is the political actors. Who owns the distribution of the good news and how do you negotiate a multiparty government communication strategy? My father [Muiris Mac Conghail] was the head of the GIS during the Fine Gael–Labour coalition from 1973 to 1977.[7] He tells the story of Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave attending a European meeting in Paris and the press corps and civil servants waiting in the antechamber for news of any breakthrough on EEC

[6] 'We the Citizens' was a participatory project in 2011–12 which sought to increase public involvement in democracy in Ireland. See http://www.wethecitizens.ie

[7] Muiris Mac Conghail, an award-winning broadcaster and head of GIS during the lifetime of the 1973–7 Fine Gael–Labour coalition led by Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave.

[membership] negotiations. Later, Muiris was approached by a French official with a note on a silver tray from his boss (Cosgrave). The press and officials were waiting for the scoop. The note asked for an update to the Blackrock postal strike, which was in Cosgrave's constituency.

Concluding remarks

Fiach Mac Conghail's recollection about his father's work as a government communication specialist in the mid 1970s is a salient reminder that even when practised at the highest level, political life is firmly rooted in the local. The story also chimes with the previously mentioned advice proffered by another Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, to his civil service staff about looking after his party colleagues. The needs of the constituency – driven by a motivation to be re-elected – also underpinned Derek McDowell's observation that special/media advisors can favour their own minister's priorities over the wider agenda of the government of which they are all part.

Against this backdrop, the place of communications at the heart of the governmental system has undoubtedly become even more complex over the last half century. In an Irish context there are more media outlets, more specialist reporters, more political media advisors and greater demands from the public for engagement in policy formation and decision-making. In addition, the last ten years have brought new social media platforms into the communications mix.

There was consensus from the three roundtable participants that many elements of the crisis communications strategies adopted during the Covid-19 period might not necessarily continue as part of a 'tool-kit' when communicating government in more normal times. Yet, as Elizabeth Canavan explained, the Covid-19 experience has shown the value of a single site such as gov.ie and the importance of having data to better understand public thinking. Enhancing trust remains paramount irrespective of whether governments are communicating in a crisis or in non-crisis times. Low levels of trust between citizens and government can erode democracy and ultimately only make the job of government even more difficult.

The roundtable discussion pointed to the importance of easily understood and transparent communication with citizens as a key factor in building trust. There was less consensus about the end value of social media as a means of communicating public information. Nevertheless, even Elizabeth Canavan and Derek McDowell – in their differing perspectives – agreed about the influence of the internet on

government communications. All three roundtable participants expressed concerns about the quality of information in the public domain when public policy issues are being discussed (and specifically in the online space). In this special issue, Anna Pringle and David Robbins, in their analysis of climate change discourse in Ireland, offer one illustration of the challenges facing policymakers when dealing with complex policy areas. The arguments presented by Declan Fahy in his article might assist in future consideration of what he calls 'the current intense focus on misinformation'.

The roundtable discussion also brought to the fore two issues specific to contemporary government communications. First, the important role that trusted experts can play in communicating complicated or contentious policy decisions on behalf of, and in tandem with, government. Indeed, Catherine Gallagher's article on the controversy created by the cocooning policy during the early stages of the Covid-19 crisis shows how – what might be considered – a relatively minor decision can play out poorly when not clearly communicated. Elizabeth Canavan also raised an important issue related to the role of experts and the challenge in responding to well-known public figures who use their external profile to extend beyond their core expert domain into media punditry.

Second, all three participants offered perspectives on the differing roles of politicians and civil servants in government communication. In an Irish context civil servants have long followed a stance that their work must ensure non-partisanship and objectivity, and that any public communication must be apolitical and focused on the delivery of agreed government policy. To a large extent, this work has primarily been in the background but the experience of Covid-19 showed the value of 'front-of-house' engagement. Both Derek McDowell and Fiach Mac Conghail saw merit in this approach. Elizabeth Canavan – who was in such a prominent communication role during the crisis – cautioned against extending crisis strategies into more normal times, and offered a useful checklist that might underpin future government communications. The merits or otherwise of new infrastructural arrangements – and the merits of a strategic unit, as discussed in this issue by Aoife Ní Mhaoláin – might be where these discussions go next to ensure the best-quality government communication is delivered for the public.