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‘Best advice available’ – Challenge and change in developing an optimal policy advisory system in Ireland

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Abstract

The concept of a policy advisory system (PAS) is devised to study the diverse range of actors involved in the policy formulation process from a system level. An optimal PAS should be adaptable, autonomous and transparent, and should deliver substantive and timely advice. This article discusses factors influencing developments in Ireland’s PAS, including the broader trends of politicisation and externalisation. The findings are informed by interviews and a survey circulated to Irish civil servants who perform policy worker tasks and are engaged in providing advice to ministers. The research finds that new structural and institutional arrangements introduced to Ireland’s PAS have created a greater capacity for evidence-based advice in the internal PAS and a more contested space for policy advice. It also highlights that this has not fundamentally disturbed embedded characteristics of the Irish policymaking environment. Political demand pressures from ministers (both personal and electoral) can drive elements of politicisation within the civil service whereby policy advice is weighted or discarded based on ministerial preferences.

Keywords: Policy advisory system, politicisation, externalisation

Introduction

The concept of a policy advisory system (PAS) was devised to study the diverse range of actors involved in the policy formulation process. It has taken root in a developing literature that reflects on the character of policy work and how advisory systems have changed over time (Howlett, 2019; Veit et al., 2017). An observation of PAS research is its inherent Westminster bias in both its theorisation (Hustedt, 2019) and country studies (Craft & Halligan, 2017). As with other systems influenced by the Westminster model, Ireland's PAS is subject to gradual and endogenous change influenced by public management and governance reforms. The national PAS also operates within an increasingly internationalised environment, growing policy complexity, sustainability imperatives, a faster political cycle and 24/7 media. It is also subject to shocks and crisis, such as the experience of the economic and financial crisis from 2008 and navigating the Covid-19 public health emergency in 2020. This highlights the importance of optimising the PAS to ensure adaptability, transparency, autonomy, and representative and relevant timely advice that is topical (see OECD, 2017).

This article discusses factors influencing recent developments in Ireland's PAS using findings from interviews and a survey circulated to Irish civil servants. The discussion also pays attention to how the 'dual dynamics' of politicisation and externalisation have affected the advisory system. Ireland is not immune to these trends given increases in political appointments, the personal and electoral preferences of ministers, and the involvement of external actors – such as consultants – in the PAS. The discussion is organised into four parts. First, a review of selected literature on PASs is presented to explain the conceptual underpinnings and the dual dynamics of politicisation and externalisation. Second, a short background context to Ireland's PAS is presented. The third section outlines the data collection methods. Fourth, a presentation of findings and the respondents' perspectives on features influencing an optimal national PAS, politicisation and externalisation are discussed alongside developments in Ireland's PAS.

Conceptualising PAS

Conceptual underpinning of PAS

The concept of a PAS presents a way of illustrating how policy advice is employed by governments in the policymaking process. PAS was

originally conceptualised by Seymour-Ure (1987) and Halligan (1995), who defined this as interlocking actors providing knowledge and recommendations to policy decision-makers and characterised by a unique configuration in accordance with the policy sector and national jurisdiction. A focus on 'system' diverts the analytical focus away from specific advisory actors studied in isolation towards a general approach and acknowledges that advice is procured beyond the boundaries of internal government expertise and knowledge sharing (Howlett, 2019; Howlett & Migone, 2014). This aligns with interpretations of the knowledge utilisation system of government constituting a 'market-place' for policy ideas and information, and composed of proximate policymakers (government, parliament), knowledge producers (academia, producers) and knowledge brokers (consultants, NGOs, interest groups and think tanks) located in proximate and peripheral locations to the government (Howlett, 2011). Another feature of the internal proximate advisory system are 'incidental advisers', those 'policy workers' engaged in a range of activities in the policy process (Veselý, 2017). Early approaches to PAS paid specific attention to the location of advisory actors by stressing that internal actors held an advantage over external actors in providing advice to government and were also likely to be subject to more direct government control (Halligan, 1995). This chimes with Wildavsky's (1979) 'speaking truth to power' idealised model of policy advice, which described policy advice as occurring inside government hierarchically, largely provided by officials, and using traditional institutions. Conventional thinking about advisory content questioned whether it conformed to either partisan 'political' or administratively 'technical' forms of advice (Craft & Howlett, 2012). This prototypical model has given way to the diversity of 'sharing truths with many actors of influence' (cited in Craft & Halligan, 2017, p. 50), which identifies fluid and dispersed advisory practices, and capacities which fuse political, technical and evidence-based perspectives (Craft & Howlett, 2012; Galanti & Lippi, 2022).

The conceptual underpinnings of PAS literature are guided by findings in Westminster-styled administrations, notably in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK (Craft & Halligan, 2017). This has given rise to references of a so-called 'Westminster bias' in PAS theorisation (Hustedt, 2019), which could misconstrue interpretations of how policy advice is configured in different administrative traditions (Veit et al., 2017). The initial preoccupation with Anglo–Saxon countries in the literature also reflects an interest in observing how

advisory systems changed from the 1990s following public management reforms that opened up public services to greater market competition, modernisation in the form of managerialism, and efforts to downsize administrative systems. Governance arrangements have also shifted in the past twenty-five years, resulting in a blurring of lines between the internal/external and the technical/political dimensions of advisory systems. Other features of a post-New Public Management (NPM) setting include a perceived erosion in public service capacity to address expanding policy competences (Craft & Howlett, 2012), as well as increasing internationalisation (Weible et al., 2020).

The complexity of the international policy environment and pervasiveness of 'perma-crisis' and 'wicked problems' – such as Brexit, climate change and Covid-19 – illustrate how PASs must adapt to supply government decision-makers' demand for robust advice in a timely fashion. Although the notion of an optimal PAS is questionable, subject to path dependencies, and the realities of compromise, dispute and differing beliefs between actors, an OECD (2017) study sets out key identifiers of what an optimal advice system should look like. The study highlights the importance of transparency and trust among actors to mitigate selectivity and provide a clear demarcation of work between politicians and advisers. It also states that autonomy and independence should be preserved at the interface between politicians, public administrators and advisory bodies, creating trusted policy outcomes which are informed, are properly assessed and avoid manipulation of the advice system (OECD, 2017).

Dual dynamics of PAS: Politicisation and externalisation

The emphasis of location and control remain valid in the conceptualisations of how PASs function and develop (Howlett, 2019; Veselý, 2013), but the factors emphasised in the academic contributions since 2012 also pay attention to the operation and dynamics within a policy domain or subsystem (Craft & Wilder, 2017), acknowledge the different locational levels (e.g. supranational) in a multilevel approach (Veselý, 2017), and further an understanding of political demand and who is influencing policy advice (Manwaring, 2019). A broad approach to exploring the development of PASs in the post-NPM setting is encapsulated in two 'change trends' that are referred to as the dual dynamics of politicisation and externalisation (Craft & Howlett, 2013; Howlett, 2019; Hustedt, 2022). They appraise where new sources of advice emerge from, and how the configuration of advisory systems has been altered by more explicit political

considerations and the increased prominence of actors external to government departments, such as consultants.

Politicisation

Politicisation receives significant scholarly attention in the public administration literature across administrative traditions (Peters & Pierre, 2004; Staroňová & Rybář, 2023). The PAS literature considers the drift towards different forms of politicisation in advisory systems, with particular attention to Westminster administrations (Craft & Howlett, 2013) and how this has arisen through the greater involvement of media, the partisan alignment of think tanks, and policy work in political parties. Politicians' utilisation of advice may be driven by its value in supporting or legitimating existing or predetermined policy preferences or electoral demands, or indeed influencing contentious policy debates. Scholars indicate that more attention should be paid to how political drivers and demand factors impact PAS dynamics (Hustedt & Veit, 2017) to offer a more 'nuanced account of the motivation, reasons and factors which might shape the political shaping and (non-) acceptance of policy advice' (Manwaring, 2019, p. 272).

In addition, the increased prominence of political appointees in many country settings (see Shaw & Eichbaum, 2018) injects a more partisan element to policy advice. This has ramifications for the traditional political–administrative dichotomy in advisory tasks and may impact on civil service neutrality in Westminster jurisdictions (see Connaughton et al., 2023). Further, the public management literature points to the linkages between the ideational motivations for public sector reforms and the desire for elected representatives to increase their control and enhance the responsiveness of the merit-based bureaucracy (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008). In this sense politically appointed advisers located in the executive may contest public service policy advice and shape advisory content. Besides either expert or explicitly partisan advice tasks, advisory activities may also take the form of brokerage and coordination – emphasising distinctions between 'procedural', 'technical-management' or 'substantive' advice (Connaughton, 2010; Craft & Howlett, 2012). In Westminster systems the numbers of ministerial or political advisers are growing and most countries do not employ legal caps (Connaughton et al., 2023). What should be remembered, however, is that the prevalence of formal politicisation in PAS outside the Anglo–Saxon administrative tradition is nothing new and is an endurable and deep-rooted feature in many administrations (Hustedt, 2022).

Externalisation

The dynamic of externalisation presents a logical continuation to the analysis of the earlier location models of insider/outsider actors and the degree of government control over them (see Halligan, 1995). It considers changes in the role, position and levels of influence of external actors in policy advice. Factors affecting externalisation in the UK, New Zealand, Canada and Australia over three decades include the internal capacity of the national policymaking system and political considerations, but this also varies according to differences between ministries and policy domains (Craft & Halligan, 2017). A principal driver for greater externalisation in PAS lies in the multifaceted and complex nature of governments' policy checklists whereby seeking solutions to issues simply transcends internal government expertise and knowledge activities (Howlett & Migone, 2014). This has resulted in the growth of private consultancy, think tanks, policy development within political parties, academia and research institutes. The demand for scientific and expert advice is reflected in literature on advisory bodies and research institutes (Galanti & Lippi, 2022; LSE GV314 Group, 2018) and 'consultocracy' (Howlett & Migone, 2014; Marciano, 2023). 'Consultocracy' discusses how the engagement of consultants requires more attention and may be viewed as giving rise to an 'invisible public service' (Howlett & Migone, 2014).

In addition, scientific knowledge production from expert advisory bodies has become more embedded in policymaking, a 'scientisation' trend that is discernible in EU governance (Gornitzka & Sverdrup, 2010, pp. 127–8). This was previously seen as operating as quite separate to executive government and politics, and the Covid-19 responses provide an example of how this changed. The uncertain nature of the crisis brought 'following the science' to the fore in advice provision and the inclusion of expert public health advice became more centralised in several jurisdictions (Donadelli & Gregory, 2022). This generally took the form of establishing bodies composed of experts from a range of disciplines located in both the internal and external PAS – proximate and peripheral. The reliance of these advisory bodies to inform government decision-making was one of the most prominent features of advisory activities during the pandemic (Boin et al., 2020). The post-Covid-19 context places greater demands on governments to address sustainability and climate breakdown, geopolitical changes and the role of technology innovation – and the contestation of these challenges – highlighting the importance of striving for optimality within a national PAS. The dynamics of

politicisation and externalisation also remain pervasive and are influential in reshaping anglophone tradition styled PAS whereby governments generally have more latitude to reorganise and implement preferred forms of governing (Marciano & Craft, 2023, p. 6).

Developing an internal PAS system in Ireland

Ireland's model of government and administration belongs with interpretations of 'Westminster', such as Russell & Serban's (2021, p. 745) application of the term 'to describe countries influenced by the British system'. The Westminster system is the one that is seen to 'best reflect the politico–administrative relationship' in Ireland which has been subject to modernisation and legislative reform (MacCormaic, 2016, p. 61). This features an independent, apolitical and generalist civil service that advises on and implements the decisions of an elected government. The legal principle of a 'corporation sole' is laid out in the Ministers and Secretaries Act 1924, designating the minister as politically responsible for the performance of their department. This legal requirement for ministers to account along with conventions of ministerial responsibility led to a risk-averse culture. This potentially stymies an advisory system since senior officials become overly enmeshed in the particulars of policy oversight and management details. In comparison to larger state administrations, the senior civil service is a relatively small cadre of officials undertaking both advisory and management roles (Connaughton, 2015, p. 214), and they operate at the nexus between the political and administrative systems. Senior officials occupy a key location in the PAS and the Irish state has traditionally depended on their policy analysis skills and abilities (MacCarthaigh, 2021, p. 48).

The civil service is regarded as the nucleus of the wider public service. Over time its advisory role has evolved internally in pursuit of disciplinary and specialist knowledge, in addition to policy analysis skills. Its work is assisted by a range of arms-length or internal peripheral advisory/policy analysis bodies established by the state. They include offices such as the Comptroller and Auditor General's (C&AG) Office (1923) and bodies such as the Central Statistics Office (CSO) (1949), Institute of Public Administration (1957), Economic and Social Research Institute (1960) and National Economic and Social Council (1973). This evolving 'organisational infrastructure' provides alternative sources of advice for policymakers, and such

bodies were established not to rival the civil service but to serve 'as reinforcements' (Lee, 1989, p. 365). Other developments such as Ireland's membership of the European Union, a greater representation of sectoral participants on advisory bodies, and public management reform programmes have further reinforced and challenged the advisory system. For example, the expansion of agencies created by the state to respond to new policy demands is a notable enhancement of the public administration landscape (MacCarthaigh, 2014).

The importance of sources of informed, verifiable and evidence-based policy advice was highlighted in the midst of the economic and fiscal crisis engulfing Ireland's government from late 2008. Dealing with the crisis also drew attention to the importance of embedding institutions and structures in the PAS to deliver advice objectively, confidently and without interference (Honohan, 2010). Further, a noteworthy contribution to building the PAS in recent times was the formation of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) in 2012 (MacCarthaigh, 2017; Ruane & Lunne, 2013). The necessity for strengthening and improving the adaptability of the policymaking system, including the advice function, is all the more imperative given the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic (OECD, 2023). This is recognised in *Our Shared Future*, the programme for government, which advocates collaboration and policy innovation (Government of Ireland, 2020), and the civil service renewal strategy to 2013, *Building on our Strengths*, which identifies evidence-informed policy and services as a core theme to address within a values-based civil service culture (Government of Ireland, 2021).

The following section outlines the methodology for the study before discussing the PAS developments and change dynamics.

Methodology

The literature review indicates that classifying the location of advisory actors, as internal and external to government, and the degree of control a government can exert on those actors is a useful starting point for mapping an advisory system or policy domain. The dynamics of politicisation and externalisation are important drivers of how PASs have changed over time. They require unpacking to understand how the PAS has adapted to a more contestable decision-making environment, where new sources of advice emerge from, the prominence of actors – either internal or external – and the effects of more explicit political considerations.

The study is based on desk research and ten interviews with eight government officials, one politician, and a member of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council in late 2019. The interviews were supplemented with an online survey directed to each government department's management team and divisional staff. Approximately 650 emails were sent during this process and a total of 123 surveys were completed (a response rate of 19 per cent). Of the respondents to the survey, 64 per cent were male, 34 per cent were female and 2 per cent would rather not say. In terms of education the highest qualification amongst the officials who responded was a doctorate (9.8 per cent) and the most common qualification was a master's degree (55.3 per cent). The officials surveyed came from a wide range of educational backgrounds, with the majority specialising in arts, humanities and social sciences (17.1 per cent), economics (14.6 per cent) and politics/public administration (16.3 per cent). 44.7 per cent of respondents were principal officer (PO) grade, which is a policy management position. Most officials were from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, at 22.2 per cent, followed by the Department of Justice and Equality and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, both at 14.5 per cent.

The survey instrument included forced-choice and open-ended questions. Officials surveyed were asked to consider their agreement with statements on features influencing the development of PAS using a Likert item (Tables 1 and 2). For the purposes of conducting the interviews and online survey it was useful to cluster the levels and components under four headings – general information, internal and institutional advice, external advice and political–administrative dynamics.

Factors influencing developments in PAS

Optimal PAS

This section presents findings on developments in Ireland's PAS with a focus on the influence of selected advisory bodies, strategy and legislation created since the OECD reported on the Irish public service in 2008 and in advance of the Covid-19 crisis. The findings present insights into how civil servants regard features of PAS 'optimisation' (see OECD, 2017).

Respondents were asked to reflect on the quality of advice and the capacity to formulate advice in their department. Civil servants remarked on the challenge of continually responding to events,

ensuring adherence to key principles such as the public spending code, legal requirements and EU guidelines, and the importance of maintaining a cross-government perspective as elements that influence process. It was also noted: 'This [policymaking] allows a lot of flexibility to the policy owner to develop a process specific and most appropriate to the policy area in question but does place a large responsibility and onus on the policy owner to get it right and be able to withstand the oversight/scrutiny of the political system, media, lobby groups and the general public' (PO5).

The findings indicate that civil servants rate the quality of advice and their department's capacity to engage in policy formulation very highly. 82 per cent (100) of respondents assessed the quality, and 77.2 per cent (95) the policy formulation capacity, as very good/good in their department. Additional commentary indicated weaknesses around availability of data, reactive rather than strategic or evidence-based approaches, time pressures, 'excellent individuals stretched too thinly', and that it really depended on the policy issue being addressed. Providing timely and good-quality advice is a challenge given increased workloads and an ever-moving and more fluid environment (National Economic and Social Council, 2022; OECD, 2023, 2008). Commentators also consider that civil service input to formal policy analysis has deteriorated over the years, 'partly as a result of a tendency towards increased circumspection arising from freedom of information legislation' and various factors (Boyle & O'Riordan, 2021, p. 109). The survey respondents furthermore observed that departments may be good at delivering high-level policy objectives in their advice but that they can provide relatively poor policy guidance for front-line implementation downstream in the administrative system.

Role of evidence

An area which has experienced growth in the PAS is an evidence-based/informed approach to formulating policy advice. 82 per cent (101) of respondents agreed that departments utilise evidence practices, 11.5 per cent (14) neither agreed nor disagreed and 6.5 per cent (8) disagreed with the statement. An assistant secretary who agreed with the statement added that: 'This is subject to (a) availability of such evidence – frequently policy is being formulated regarding new issues where there is no good evidence base or informed practice – and (b) advocacy groups frequently influence politicians to oppose policy notwithstanding the evidence base. And in a democracy ministers/

Table 1: Features influencing an optimal PAS

Statements	*Strongly agree*	*Agree*	*Neither agree nor disagree*	*Disagree*	*Strongly disagree*
The policy formulation process in the department is innovative.	4.9% (6)	30.9% (38)	40.6% (50)	22.0% (27)	1.6% (2)
The department uses evidence-based/informed practice to formulate its policy advice.	27.1% (33)	54.9% (68)	11.5% (14)	5.7% (7)	0.8% (1)
Challenging non-substantive policy advice requires stronger leadership in the civil service.	21.2% (26)	50.0% (61)	17.0% (21)	11.8% (15)	0.0% (0)
The political environment in the policymaking process reduces the credibility of the department's work.	10.1% (12)	30.5% (38)	34.3% (42)	22.6% (28)	2.6% (3)
The Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015 sufficiently regulates and ensures the transparency of lobbying activities.	8.6% (11)	46.2% (57)	35.0% (43)	7.6% (9)	2.6% (3)
The lobbying of civil servants not identified as 'designated public officials' is a common practice. e.g. PO, AP.	4.2% (5)	21.2% (26)	36.4% (45)	29.7% (37)	8.5% (10)
IGEES has improved the contestability of advice in the policymaking process.	7.7% (9)	41.0% (51)	42.7% (53)	7.7% (9)	0.8% (1)
IGEES workers have a comprehensive understanding of their assigned policy area.	8.7% (11)	30.4% (37)	50.4% (62)	9.6% (12)	0.9% (1)

government have to be advised of the potential political implications of advice'. Several officials noted the influence of NGOs and lobbyists, and how policy advice may be dominated by specific groups in an absence of reliable and objective data.

A shift in the 'generalist model' of the civil service towards the contribution of analysts and dedicated expertise is evident in the introduction of IGEES as an integrated horizontal service across departments as opposed to a central service (Ruane, 2021, pp. 68–70). IGEES is enabled by the specific recruitment of economists who, after training, move to dedicated analytical units in departments. Their analysis supports the evidence base for policy formulation and value-for-money analysis, as well as facilitating more open dialogue with policy stakeholders. Between 2012 and 2020 it published over 200 papers across most policy areas and provided insights into key themes such as Brexit, social housing, the labour market and healthcare (IGEES, 2020). The survey respondents and interviewees considered whether IGEES improves the contestability of advice in policymaking overall and 48.7 per cent (60) of respondents agreed with the statement, 42.7 per cent (53) neither agreed nor disagreed and 8.6 per cent (10) disagreed with the statement. Furthermore, respondents were asked whether IGEES workers have a comprehensive understanding of their assigned policy area. 39.1 per cent (48) agreed with the statement, 50.4 per cent (62) neither agreed nor disagreed and 10.5 per cent (13) disagreed. Opinions offered were that IGEES work may be 'overly academic' (Interview A) whereas the quantitative element with 'increased information and data infrastructure' was considered reforming (Interview D). IGEES work in line departments does need to be effectively coordinated as:

> IGEES members were somewhat isolated at the beginning … people were not sure what their role was … they were not reporting up to economists in the departments so there was a clash … those reporting lines have changed now. (Interview E)

One member of IGEES stated that, while the service needed time to become embedded as an advisory and evaluation body, there are indirect influences on the policy process:

> IGEES is a relatively new phenomenon in the economic policy advisory process and is probably a step behind directly impacting on policy formulation. However, it is increasingly having an

> indirect effect, particularly through the spending review process … This can contribute to discussion of particular programmes and projects come budget estimates time. Overall, the IGEES impact is medium. (Interview C)

IGEES is acknowledged in the renewal strategy to 2030 as central to the coordination of data and policy analysis whereby the development of the service is intended to be 'an effective bridge between data insights and public policy' (Government of Ireland, 2021, p. 16). It is now a fixed part of the strategic policy infrastructure to ensure an evidenced-informed approach to policy. In addition, the Irish Government Statistical Service (IGSS) and the National Data Infrastructure, as led by the CSO, are further illustrations of building internal PAS capacity and ensuring both the provision and access to data.

Stronger leadership to challenge non-substantive policy advice

Respondents were asked for their views on whether challenging non-substantive policy advice required stronger official leadership in PAS, and a significant 71.2 per cent (87) strongly agreed/agreed with this statement. For example,

> The civil service needs to be allowed defend its policy advice and decisions in a more robust manner. It needs to be able and free to respond quickly to criticism. It is often a reluctance of senior management to get involved in such communications and effectively this digs a deeper hole. (Assistant Principal (AP) 2)

The findings resonate with issues raised in a senior management capability review in 2011 that found more systematic measures were required to strengthen a leadership culture within the civil service. In addition, it noted that the influence of the political system constrained leadership effectiveness (McCarthy, 2014). The concept of a 'senior public service' (SPS) is used to identify senior leadership positions throughout the Irish civil service. In 2014 a recommendation to appoint a dedicated head of the service was recommended to assist the development of a 'formal corporate centre', but it was not implemented (Rafter, 2015, p. 35). Alternatively, promoting shared ownership for public service reform was promoted through new governance structures, namely the Public Service Leadership Board supported by the Public Service Management Group. The SPS

concept itself, however, is a principal tenet of the Civil Service Renewal programme and has developed under the *Senior Public Service Leadership Development Strategy 2017–2020*, which supports mentoring and development for the top civil service cadre. Since 2011 governments have supported a drive to appoint a more diverse team of officials to expand the talent pool and range of experience within the internal PAS. The system for appointing leadership positions is more open but the success rate for serving civil servants is much higher than for outside applicants. In both 2020 and 2021 the Top Level Appointments Committee (TLAC) did not recommend any private sector candidates for appointment (TLAC, 2021, 2022). Workforce planning, a 'talent pipeline' and official leadership capacity are important issues for the operation of the PAS.

Transparency at a policy worker level

The Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015 categorised 'designated public officials' who must report on their interactions with lobbyists. This includes ministers, special advisers, and official grades of secretary general, deputy secretary, assistant secretary or director. It did not include PO, AP or administrative officer (AO) grades. The purpose of the legislation is greater openness and public scrutiny regarding the extent to which sectoral groups obtain access to policymakers and decision-makers (Murphy, 2017). Respondents were asked questions concerning the effectiveness of the 2015 Act and whether it captures the engagement between policymakers and lobbyists in the PAS appropriately. The findings indicate that while the 2015 Act made lobbying practices more transparent and subject to scrutiny, key policy worker grades are not captured in the lobbying process. 54.8 per cent (68) of respondents agreed that the Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015 sufficiently regulates and ensures transparent lobbying practices. 35 per cent (43) of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Additional remarks from respondents demonstrate a satisfaction with the arrangements in place to strike a balance between lobbying transparency and allowing the policymaking process to function properly.

> It improves transparency, while still allowing the civil service to engage and understand the position of various interest groups when formulating policy. (PO1)

But with caveats:

> System is poorly understood by those using it and captures formal engagements which are already known but does not capture the informal lobbying efforts by which much influence is wielded. (AP1)

Many respondents stated this area was not relevant to their role or they were unaware of scrutinising lobbying practices to have an opinion on the matter. This is indicative of the wide range of roles that policy workers perform, with some more involved in stakeholder engagements than others. Respondents were then asked the question whether they believed that the lobbying of civil servants who are not identified as designated public officials is common practice. 25.4 per cent (30) agreed with the statement, while 36.4 per cent (45) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 38.2 per cent (47) disagreed with the statement.

> Yes, I am lobbied extensively in my line of work. (PO2)
>
> Meetings between stakeholders and POs and APs is quite common in my experience. (PO3)
>
> Relevant and known officials dealing with particular matters will be known to interested and concerned parties. (PO4)

Significantly, whilst the overall finding does not indicate that the practice is extremely prevalent, a secretary general from a central government department agreed that lobbying of the lower grades is a common practice. Similarly, five assistant secretaries also agreed that the practice occurs. The respondents' comments clarify that those involved in particular policymaking roles involving stakeholders are lobbied, with some being more 'prone' to it than others, and that there is an awareness by interest groups of 'relevant and known officials'. A significant number of interviews and survey respondents identified that AO, AP, PO grades 'drive policy research', 'do the groundwork' and may provide briefings to ministers. An objective of the Regulation of Lobbying (Amendment) Bill 2022, before Seanad Éireann in 2023, is strengthening the existing legislation and its enforcement, bringing it up to date and making it fit for purpose.

Politicisation and externalisation

The politico–administrative regime directly influences the demand for policy advice, in terms of its quantity, usefulness and from where it

comes (Veselý 2017). This section presents a discussion on selected themes arising from politicisation and externalisation influences in Ireland's PAS.

Political demand pressures as a driver of politicisation

In 2008 the OECD report on the public service stated:

> Historically, the Public Service has acted as a countervailing force to balance parochial pressures, but some observers feel that there is growing politicisation of policy advice, and a previously unseen unwillingness of senior civil servants to provide analysis that runs counter to political wishes. (OECD, 2008, p. 266)

This resonates with reporting from the OECD in 2023 that highlights:

> there is a pressure at times from ministers to fast-track policies without adequate analysis and advice which end up being hard to implement and/or have undesired side effects … Interviewees also reported that in certain instances they had a concern that the advice provided was not accorded the weight it might have by ministers … Some officials felt they were not always able to influence priority setting, seen as a 'very political process' as exemplified also by responses of some of the political level. (OECD, 2023, p. 59)

Political demand – through a range of motivations, inducement and institutional drivers – influences how key decision-makers seek out 'forms' of policy advice (Manwaring, 2019). This pays attention to the context that policy actors operate within as this can contribute to the dynamics of advice provision. The findings provide insights into civil servants' observations about how the personal and electoral preferences of a minister may influence the advice they will listen to. Furthermore, these pressures – for example, pay-off for a specific group or timing in the electoral cycle – may impress on the advice provided by their officials (Manwaring, 2019). When asked whether the personal preferences of a minister can limit the diversity of advice provided, 56.3 per cent (69) of survey respondents agreed and 26.9 per cent (33) disagreed. Those who agreed noted a lack of a 'willingness to listen' and 'predetermined outcomes' by ministers. Electoral priorities may also limit the diversity of advice provided to ministers and 53 per

Table 2: Politicisation and externalisation

Statements	*Strongly agree*	*Agree*	*Neither agree nor disagree*	*Disagree*	*Strongly disagree*
Ministers are informed of all available policy options in the policymaking process.	23.5% (29)	53.8% (66)	16.0% (20)	6.7% (8)	0.0% (0)
The department consults widely in developing policy options for government.	28.5% (35)	56.1% (69)	8.9% (11)	5.7% (7)	0.8% (1)
The personal preferences of a minister can limit the diversity of advice provided to him/her.	15.1% (18)	41.2% (51)	16.8% (21)	25.2% (31)	1.7% (2)
The electoral priorities of a minister can limit the diversity of policy advice provided to him/her.	14.3% (17)	38.7% (48)	17.7% (22)	27.7% (34)	1.6% (2)
Senior civil servants offer 'frank and fearless' advice to their ministers.	16.8% (21)	47.9% (59)	21.9% (27)	12.6% (15)	0.8% (1)
The political environment in the policymaking process reduces the credibility of the department's work.	10.1% (12)	30.5% (38)	34.3% (42)	22.6% (28)	2.6% (3)
The department is dependent on external consultants for its policy advice.	2.5% (3)	8.5% (10)	20.3% (25)	50.9% (63)	17.8% (22)
External consultants are used when there is an absence of policy capacity within the department.	6.8% (8)	50.4% (62)	16.2% (20)	21.5% (27)	5.1% (6)
External consultants are an effective use of departmental resources.	1.7% (2)	37.3% (46)	34.8% (43)	17.0% (21)	9.2% (11)
External consultants' advice is used to rationalise policy decisions.	1.7% (2)	34.8% (43)	33.9% (42)	25.4% (31)	4.2% (5)

cent (65) of respondents agreed with this statement. The programme for government represents a policy agenda borne of parties' political mandates and this can impose limitations on civil servants' advisory activities and close off debates before substantial costings. Commentary included: 'Well-formulated programmes for government produced by parties without administrative input can mean that the field of policy options is narrowed a lot before the public service becomes involved' (PO Senior 1). Also, 'One of the weaknesses of the system is getting political involvement in the process rather than just the decisions made; there is a lot of working backwards for the political system' (Interview E).

Several respondents acknowledged that previous experience and political opposition to certain policy options would limit their possibility as 'real' options offered in advice as well as 'options being weighted'. This highlighted the responsiveness of some civil servants to ministerial preferences – be they personal, electoral or ideological. While all policy options are available and are presented in some shape or form (submission, briefing notes, green paper, etc.), a greater emphasis may be placed on preferential advice. It was commented: 'Advice can be offered, but it may not be welcomed. Also, some senior management try to issue advice that suits the minister's preferences' (AP1). This indicates that, on occasion, the selectivity of advice demanded or supplied potentially limits the optimal nature of an advisory system.

Modes of politicisation in PAS

The action of 'speaking truth to power' is a recognised aspect of the advisory system (Wildavsky, 1979). When asked if senior civil servants offer 'frank and fearless' advice to their ministers, 64.7 per cent (80) agreed, 21.9 per cent (27) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, and 13.4 per cent (16) disagreed. It was stressed that the advice chain from officials to minister(s) is 'cordial', 'clear' and 'where necessary, frank' with due respect to the executive power of ministerial office. The delivery and communication of advice has been criticised at intervals – for example, in issues arising in the Department of Health and Children regarding the practice of charging for nursing homes fees, examined in the Travers Report (2005). Also, the Wright Report's (2010, p. 28) analysis of the Department of Finance's performance and capacity in pre-crisis advice provision indicated that the department had included warnings on pro-cyclical policies but 'should have adapted its advice in tone and urgency after a number of years of fiscal complacency'.

Several respondents who agreed that senior civil servants figuratively speak truth to power qualified their answer with references to impacts for promotional opportunities for those who challenge advice:

> Since Mr X was passed over for secretary general here the feeling is that speaking honestly to power is not good for one's career. (Senior Official 1)

> The best ones do, the ones with personal ambitions often don't want to take the risk. There is also the desire to be 'strategic' rather than transparent. (Senior Official 2)

> Not if they have an eye on the next promotion! (Senior Official 3)

Such commentary demonstrates some alignment with research evidence that officials in policymaking positions may engage in the appeasement of ministers by limiting policy advice 'to accommodate political concerns'. One of the main explanations for this behaviour was rewards in career advancement (MacCormaic, 2016, p. 107). Top-level appointments (assistant secretary and secretary general) in the civil service are organised predominantly through the TLAC competitive process and the Public Appointments Service.[1] TLAC recommends candidates and, under the Ministers and Secretaries Act 1924, a secretary general of a department is appointed by the government on the recommendation of the relevant minister. The practice of presenting more than one name to government 'opens up the possibility that Secretaries General could be appointed for reasons other than merit' (MacCormaic, 2016, p. 77). This does indicate the potential for loopholes in the process for high-level appointments requiring a government decision. A 2021 report on practices applying to appointments of senior public service officials highlighted the importance of detailed procedures, documented processes and non-ambiguous approaches (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021).[2]

[1] With the exception of the appointment of secretaries general in the Departments of An Taoiseach, Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Foreign Affairs, as well as the appointment of the Secretary General to the President. A minister can decide to utilise the TLAC process for such a role, as was the case for the appointment of the secretary general at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in 2021.

[2] A public consultation and an Independent Review Panel to review senior public service recruitment and pay processes were announced in March 2022.

Ireland's public administration has one of the lowest scores on patronage (79/84) in the Quality of Government Expert Survey 2020 and is within the top twenty-five countries on demonstrating impartiality (23/84) (Nistotskaya et al., 2021). The PAS literature on politicisation trends highlights that an increase in political appointees brings a more partisan dimension to policy advice. Ministerial advisers are provided for in the Public Service Management Act 1997 and their contributions are recognised as an accepted feature of executive government (Connaughton, 2017; Shaw, 2023). Respondents acknowledged their place in the PAS but did not attribute them a significant role in substantive advice provision. They were recognised as one of the many sources of expertise and analysis that ministers have at their disposal. Commentary was qualified to remarks such as 'they were fine once they chose someone of ability' and '[advisers] have not interfered with the policymaking process per se'. The contribution that advisers make generally does not lie in expert (technical) advice but in political advice and services that would be inappropriate for ministers to request from an impartial civil service. This 'ideational compatibility' has a place in advisory systems (see Craft & Wilder, 2017; Manwaring, 2018), and advisers play an important coordination role in Irish coalition governments but do not have management roles in a department (Connaughton, 2010, 2022). Political coordination activities ascribe advisers a 'fixer' role, emphasised in the remark from an interviewee that once political advisers are kept fully informed, 'all hell breaking loose at the last minute' is generally avoided.

Externalisation

Externalisation extends our understanding of the metaphor 'marketplace of ideas' to incorporate externally located suppliers of advice and acknowledges that 'filling in' is a distinct trend across PASs, in part driven by public management reforms (Craft & Howlett, 2013). Externalisation is also interlinked with politicisation dynamics, as illustrated by references to Westminster systems and the activities of politically appointed advisers who are sceptical of official advice and will 'broker' external advice while performing as 'gatekeepers' and bridges to ideologically aligned think tanks (Diamond, 2020). Context also matters since events such as the global financial crisis and Covid-19 lead to a greater representation of disciplines and experts in the PAS. Covid-19 presented as an existential threat testing the capacities of politics and public administration to deliver solutions and public

service provision. The engagement with decision-makers and experts in advice provision, and greater collaboration with academia, was demonstrated by the roles of the National Public Health Emergency Team, its Expert Advisory Group and support groups. The advisory arrangements were regarded as atypical in their relationship to the centre of government and in comparison to prior policymaking practices that had dealt 'somewhat passively and intermittently with experts, stakeholders, and citizens' (National Economic and Social Council, 2022, p. 4). Further, the aftermath of a crisis may lead to new institutional developments that foster a greater plurality in advice provision. For example, the global financial/eurozone crisis was a watershed that steered the introduction of new research, institutional oversight and scrutiny mechanisms such as the Parliamentary Budget Office and the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council. The evidence of 'good practices' emerging during the earlier crisis in terms of 'evidence and lessons learned' enabled Ireland's response when the Covid-19 pandemic hit (OECD, 2023, p. 21).

'Consultocracy'

Survey respondents were asked to assess the role of external consultants under the statements in Table 2. Respondents clearly indicated that their department was not dependent on external consultants for advice, since 68.7 per cent (85) disagreed/strongly disagreed. Only 39 per cent (48) of respondents agreed that the use of external consultants is an effective use of departmental resource, versus 34.8 per cent (43) who neither agreed nor disagreed and 26.2 per cent (32) who disagreed. The practice of employing consultants for advice and recommendations was a distinct practice in the period prior to the economic crisis in 2008. This is illustrated in a C&AG report in 2007 that pointed to the €79 million paid to consultants during 1994–6, compared to €124 million paid during 2004–5 (C&AG, 2007). Consultancy has been defended as means to 'distance senior civil servants and ministers from responsibility for new initiatives or a reluctance to take a decision until there is a report to recommend it' (private interview cited in Connaughton, 2012, p. 82). In this study 36.5 per cent (45) of respondents agreed that external consultants are used to rationalise policy decisions, versus 29.6 per cent (36) who disagreed and nearly 34 per cent (42) who neither agreed nor disagreed. 'Their use can be explicit – the use of consultants gets you a different angle' (Interview D). Consultancy advice does take different forms and the public sector also works in partnership with consultants to deliver

modernisation initiatives, and progress the implementation of large-scale infrastructural projects or on-site roll-outs (Interview B). The findings also signal that 57.2 per cent (70) of civil servants who responded to the survey observed that consultants are used when there is a lack of policy capacity in their respective department. This chimes with earlier commentary that a justification for employing consultants is a gap in in-house skills/expertise or 'because there are insufficient in-house resources to complete a task in the time available' (O'Toole & Dooney, 2009, p. 179); also, that a greater collaboration with IGEES is important since some departments typically turn to consultants to meet technical needs (OECD, 2023, p. 78). A growth in research services in the Houses of the Oireachtas, leveraging IGEES services across departments, the IGSS, the CSO, and the development of dedicated research/policy units and networks in and across government departments, however, are examples of how the internal PAS has developed in the past decade.

Conclusion

The literature on PASs evolved from its attention on actors' locations to consider how national PASs have changed alongside transformations in public governance (Howlett, 2019; Hustedt, 2022). This includes public service reform, a diminution in official control in how advice is provided to ministers, EU/internationalisation developments, data analysis developments and the perpetuity of crisis in twenty-first century governance. Such developments are reflected in more recent theory building on PAS based on the trends of increasing politicisation and externalisation, which recognise partisan contestation and the growth in advisory actors located external to government departments. This article explored features of Ireland's PAS, which remains influenced by the Westminster tradition and therefore fits well with the conceptual understandings of PAS in international research, the initial interpretations of politicisation and externalisation advanced in the literature (Craft & Howlett, 2013), and how conventions and features of the broader political system are critical in configuring national PASs.

The discussion was informed by interviews and a survey circulated to civil servants engaged in policy advice functions, as well as secondary sources which have surveyed aspects of Ireland's PAS over time. Identifiers of an optimal advice system were also considered in terms of capacity, evidence base, demarcation of political and adminis-

trative roles, and transparency. Ireland's policy analysis capability is more varied than it was thirty years ago and recognises the importance of building on existing policy formulation capacity, and disciplinary and analytical skills (Government of Ireland, 2021; Hogan & Murphy, 2021). This is evident in internal reconfigurations, the development of IGEES, IGSS and research networks in providing evidenced-based analysis, and more attention to efforts to recruit specialist skills. This needs to be complemented with communicating policy and citizen engagement to ensure that evidenced-based policy outputs are accepted and trusted by the public they are intended to serve.

As identified in the studies of Westminster advisory systems the senior civil service retains its pivotal historical role (Craft & Halligan, 2017) and relevance as proximate policy actors in the internal PAS. A more diverse PAS, however, requires that advisory influence is shared with other actors – either in the wider public service or externally. Further, the complexity of policy problems calls for expertise that may not be resident internally. In addition, politicisation and political demand pressures distinctly influence the Irish PAS and present challenges for public officials in providing a range of advice options in the policy formulation process.

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