# CUTE HOORS AS LOCAL HEROES: POLITICIANS AND PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY

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## Politicians and Constituency Service

When Paddy O'Carroll referred to Irish politicians as 'cute hoors', he was reflecting on the 'appreciation [in rural Irish communities] of the skill of the "fixer"' (O'Carroll 1987:81):

> . . . to be successful in politics aspirants to office have to be able to show they have power. Those who can deliver material favours are said to have 'pull'. In the continuous, intense competition necessitated by the electoral system, 'pull' indicates an ability to 'deliver' more than other competitors for political office. The fact that most of that which is delivered is imaginary in no way lessens the degree of confidence in the person who is seen to have 'pull' . . . In local parlance the actions which most strikingly demonstrate power, however, are termed 'strokes'. The perpetrator of a stroke is called a 'cute hoor', a term which denotes a certain admiration for the way in which he outmanoeuvres his competitors (O'Carroll, 1987: 82).

Today, the politician is afforded a less heroic role, even in rural Ireland. There is no doubt that there is a major sense of scandal and hurt among electors after the revelations of recent tribunals regarding the scale of corruption, the money involved and the range of business and political figures implicated. In an atmosphere of scandal, many now assert that all politicians have been guilty of corruption. Often this assertion is modified when particularly popular politicians are named, but the general accusation is still affirmed. It seems like an odd time, therefore, to be proposing to increase the role of politicians in our daily lives. From the perspective of developing political marketing

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theory, however, it may be appropriate to ask whether the public's current outrage is the result of a lack of clarity about what the electorate and others expect of their representatives.

For most Irish citizens, their interaction with the state is routine and at local level. There is no expectation that bribes are required to obtain or facilitate services from local authority, state or related agencies. Despite very infrequent cases of fraud, Irish bureaucracy is not extractive or arbitrary. In local government, outside planning, corruption is incidental (Collins and O'Shea, 2000). Even when citizens seek the intervention of politicians, as is commonplace in Ireland, money or favours are not exchanged.

In formal terms, the delivery of public services in Ireland is fashioned by the Wilsonian dichotomy between policy and administration. This formula assigns general issues of allocation to politicians and specific entitlements to bureaucrats. However, the notion that politics and administration are separate is unhelpful. It asserts that public servants are politically neutral. While they may be non-partisan, few would now agree that the way in which civil servants do their jobs is irrelevant to the political process. The insights of Simon (1965), Lindblom (1977), Mueller (1993) and others suggest bureaucracies that exhibit a large measure of irrationality and distinctive goals of their own. Similarly, it is clear that politicians are actively involved in the implementation of public policy on the ground, as opposed to just designing and directing from a distance. Hence, the Weberian dichotomy between the roles of the politician and the bureaucrat is a limiting perspective for the analysis of contemporary political activity and public service management.

Public sector reform strategies deriving from the Strategic Management Initiative (SMI) of 1996, while embracing many aspects of current management thinking, may further entrench this supposed division of labour between politicians and public servants. This paper asks whether the weight of the evidence about the actual delivery of public services demands a more realistic model that would incorporate politicians and political activists through the entire process of public service delivery.

Public sector reform and the pervasive nature of clientelism in Ireland (which gives rise to political activism at the delivery stages of public service marketing) are outlined first. Then, the reasons for politicians engaging in constituency service in the manner that they do is reviewed. A note on localism in other political systems follows. The paper then looks to the new and expanding field of political marketing for a perspective that would explain the actions of politicians,

the accommodating strategies of bureaucrats, and the strategic behaviour of citizens. In promoting such an understanding, the argument tries to avoid the analytically unhelpful rush to judgement of much of Irish commentary on the role of politicians in public service delivery. Rather, it attempts to assess the significance of brokerage in Irish public service management, and to provide a means by which to incorporate politicians as "consumer advocates" rather than persistent anachronisms.

## Public Sector Reform and Clientelism

Few areas of public life are going through such radical reform as government departments, local authorities and semi-state bodies. Public servants of a previous generation would hardly recognise the language, structure and ethos of the current public service. The public sector is clearly adopting a business orientation and management terminology. Since the late 1960s, there have been several similar suggestions for reforming the structure of administration. Basic to the reformers' views is the idea that politicians and the most senior civil servants who were freed from day-to-day responsibility for administration *per se* would make better policy.

The increasing parallels between the business of government and the business of business is recognised in all the recent public sector reforms, e.g. the Public Service Management Act, 1997. The 1997 Act provides that the traditional role of senior civil servants as policy advisers be complemented by an enhanced role as managers of the service. There is now more emphasis on delegation of functions, policy appraisal, strategic and performance management and ensuring that appropriate accountability procedures are in place. This Act is a key piece of the wider process of civil service reform being driven by the SMI and *Delivering Better Government*, a programme for change for the Irish civil service introduced in 1996. A central thrust of these reforms is that other parts of government and the public be regarded as customers. All government departments produced a customer service action plan in 1998–1999 which outlined the principles of quality customer service including such matters as standards, complaints, redress, access, co-ordination and information. These changes are timely because private citizens, used to being treated as discerning customers in other aspects of their lives, are beginning to take a more consumerist view of the public service. Although this perspective of public service may be new in the Republic of Ireland, other liberal democracies with similar traditions of public service

have already embraced a consumer orientation. The very influential *Reinventing Government* by Osborne and Gaebler (1992) enjoins governments at all levels to reconstruct themselves around the needs of the customer.

Clientelism can be described as an informal, pervasive and accepted system of transactions involving politicians seeking particular and preferential treatment for individual voters. In Ireland, there is an expectation that politicians will act on behalf of constituents looking for favourable treatment by public servants, especially when some ambiguity or grounds for discretion can be identified. This is referred to in the Irish context as clientelism, although it is more accurately brokerage. The key distinction is that the politician is dispersing state owned benefits rather than personal largesse. Up to the early 1970s, for example, low-level public sector posts were awarded at the discretion of local politicians. Thus, jobs as local authority rent collectors and manual workers could be 'found' using political influence. These positions are no longer susceptible to either direct control or routine interference by politicians. The elector may or may not be accommodated, but the politician will feel that some electoral advantage has been gained from the exchange.

In Ireland, politicians have been described as specialists helping the 'bureaucratically illiterate' (Gallagher and Komito, 1992). It is the working class who use the clientelist system most: it is the social welfare, housing and medical entitlements cases that dominate deputies' caseloads. These 'customer' complaints may not be heard if not facilitated by politicians. It is important to note that the evidence from case studies offers a picture of brokerage that is low key and routine. Major allocative decisions are not involved. Rather, the politician is like a 'lawyer, who operates not by bribing the judge, but by ensuring that the case is presented better than the citizen would be able to present it' (Gallagher and Komito,1992: 140).

Apart from minor constituency services, some senior politicians are able to secure larger benefits. As Garret FitzGerald notes:

> [There is an] expectation . . . that ministers will not merely ensure that particular problems relating to their area are borne in mind generally by government, but that their minister will deliver specific benefits to their constituency . . . Unhappily this expectation is often realised; pork-barrelling of this kind is a feature of the Irish governmental system (*Irish Times*,1 March 1997).

Even since FitzGerald made these comments, the benefits to some constituencies of a local minister have included the allocation of government offices under a decentralisation policy.

## Imperatives of Constituency Service

The main reasons for the degree of entrenchment and the significant scale of constituency work in Ireland include the political cultural attitude to the state, the small scale of society, the electoral system, and the nature of the Irish administrative system (Gallagher and Komito, 1992). Basil Chubb (1992) explained brokerage in terms of a deeply rooted experience, in which a person with connections and influence was required to achieve benefits from public authorities in a colonial past. This outlook, he maintains, lingers to the present. This is not unrelated to the suspicion with which rural citizens regard public officials in Dublin, and which determines that a process of intercession is required, even where it is not officially necessary.

Political power in Ireland is concentrated in relatively few hands. The number of people in key positions of private and institutional power is small enough for elite members to be known and accessible to each other. This greatly facilitates the interventions of politicians on behalf of clients. People in influential positions may have ascended from different professional paths, but there are often common elements in their educational and social backgrounds. Similarly, the range of political and social attitudes is sufficiently narrow for there seldom to be ideological barriers to treating interventions sympathetically. As with politicians, in the bureaucracy, there is no tradition of social exclusivity. The main barrier to entry into the public service is educational achievement, which in Ireland has been eased for almost all classes by free or inexpensive secondary schooling. There is a tendency for higher civil servants to have attended schools run by religious orders, but there is no 'old school tie' tradition.

The stability of the party system, the lack of deep ideological divisions between the main parties, and a tradition of strict party discipline in parliament have had an important effect on the way individual politicians strive for election. Under the single transfer vote system in multi-member constituencies, individual politicians must compete not only against the candidates of other parties, but also against fellow party nominees. The main priority for each politician is that he or she is personally successful. To ensure success regardless of party fortunes, a politician must have some basis of support among the electorate other than partisan allegiance. Brokerage provides this insur-

ance. Much of an Irish politician's time is, therefore, taken up telephoning or writing to government ministers, civil servants, local government managers and others in authority on behalf of constituents.

The Irish administrative system is similar to that of other former British territories. It allows discretion to individual officials within a framework of regulation, legislation, etc. Administrative accountability is based largely on *ex post facto* criteria of reasonableness and a central role for case law and precedent. This approach to service delivery and allocative decisions is reflected in a framework of administrative law that eschews the extensive system of codified law that is prevalent in continental Europe. This more flexible 'common law' tradition encourages politicians to bring the particularities of individual cases to the attention of bureaucrats and favours those with a close knowledge of how the system has operated in previous cases.

## Localism in Other Political Systems

Localism is not specific to Ireland. The term 'pork-barrel politics' is itself American and the phenomenon is widespread in other parts of Europe. There is little evidence that public officials charged with economic development projects or other major public expenditure are compromised by local politics. Indeed, it is arguable that Ireland's success in attracting multinational investment may be a by-product of the probity of its officials. In the USA,

> [m]uch of the work performed by the large staffs of members of Congress is casework – such services for constituents as tracking down a social security check or directing the owner of a small business to the appropriate federal agency. Constituents who are helped in this way usually remember who assisted them (Janda et al., 1999: 101).

Indeed, the history of 'pork barrel politics' suggests that politicians will ensure that they receive credit for all investment into their constituencies, whether or not they were responsible. Similarly, politicians and parties attempt to intervene in the public sector service process in an attempt to gain credit for good works. Tip O Neill's famous quip 'all politics is local' captures the essential necessity and imperative of electoral competition in the USA.

> In major part, owing to their role as constituency representative, incumbents are said to have become virtual masters of their own fate, insulated from generally adverse public perceptions of Con-

> gress's internal procedures, policy making and ethical standards. (Born, 1990: 1224)

In France also, senior politicians are careful to preserve regional links, even to the point of retaining relatively junior local positions while members of the cabinet or occupying other senior national positions. Frears (1990) reports that the national political representative in Paris is expected by constituents to intercede with central government on behalf of local individuals or councils, rather than to spend time legislating or debating the great issues of the day.

The Jospin government, which came to power in 1997, had promised to reform the dual mandate or *cumul* but, as *Le Monde* notes with irony, the imperatives of securing their local bases were more important for left wing deputies than democratic theories in the municipal elections of 2001:

> *Le cumul entre les mandats de député et de maire chez les socialistes élus en juin 1997 se porte bien, merci! La 'génération Jospin', qui se voulait le fer de lance de la rénovation politique et qui n'avait pas de mots assez durs contre les 'cumulards' lors du débat sur la limitation du cumul des mandats, se serait-elle mise au parfum? Ou aurait-elle la mémoire qui flanche? On connaît la réponse des intéressés: tant que ce cumul n'est pas interdit –à cause du veto de la droite sénatoriale, bien sûr! –, les socialistes ne vont pas se faire hara-kiri...* (22 March 2001).

Until recently, local presence and constituency service was thought to be of marginal electoral significance in Britain. One explanation for the constituency activities of MPs is the avoidance of the pointlessness of life on the backbenches. Indeed, MPs for the Celtic peripheries are especially expected to display a commitment to local matters and actively promote the constituency at the core. There is now a marked change in the role of British MPs, who are increasingly paying more attention to 'surgeries' and direct contacts with their constituents to protect themselves from electoral swings (Norris, 1997).

## Political Marketing

Business success is a function of superior strategy, committed people, quality information and excellent implementation. However, the one factor common to successful companies is that they are strongly customer-focused and heavily committed to marketing (Kotler et al., 1996). Professional marketing is no longer confined to large commer-

cial organisations; in fact, it is increasingly practised within and beyond business firms and in all sectors of the economy. Professionals such as lawyers, architects and physicians have adopted modern marketing practices in recent times. Similarly, non-profit and social enterprises including hospitals, theatres and churches have begun to market themselves and their services more consciously. Social marketing campaigns by government agencies are common in areas such as energy conservation, environmental protection and public health. Irish charities, such as Trócaire and Goal, have a long tradition of marketing themselves and their causes. Near-monopolies such as the Electricity Supply Board and Bord Gáis are clearly engaged in marketing. Further, although they themselves may not use the term, political parties are more 'marketing-oriented', and have become major clients of advertising, public relations and promotions agencies. In the United States, one observer described the Clinton administration as a 'marketing presidency' (Newman, 1995).

The theory and practice of marketing in political systems has become known as 'political marketing'. It is broadly understood to involve the application of marketing principles and procedures in political campaigns by various individuals and organisations (Newman, 1999). While it is an engaging and expanding field, it is not without debate regarding its domain and focus. O'Shaughnessy (1999), for instance, argues that the term itself is a misnomer, since marketing, as a conceptual framework, fails as an adequate description. Its beguiling but superficial similarity to consumerism suggests a conceptual uniformity that he rejects. Instead, O'Shaughnessy promotes the adoption of a hyphenated language, that draws in the lessons and principles of propaganda to reflect more accurately the issues and processes involved. In a related discussion on domain, Butler and Collins (2001, forthcoming) contend that limiting political marketing to what occurs during formal campaigns dismisses the reality of the 'permanent campaign', much of which is fought out in the daily efforts of politicians in their constituency work. Nonetheless, there is a general acceptance that political marketing is a field that will continue to develop, as it has meaning for electoral explanations and practices, and contributes to a deeper understanding of general marketing theory by its application in challenging, non-mainstream contexts.

In the political context, the marketing approach may counter other lines of argument. Those who take a paternalistic approach to public service provision argue that the average citizen cannot be allowed to make choices because they are not well informed. This argument also suggests that competition will force standards down to the lowest

available level; consumer choice will make life more difficult for public service providers; and, treating citizens as consumers will lead to uniformity of service. However, the experience of a more explicit, purposeful approach to marketing in the private sector belies these arguments, as does public sector experience elsewhere (McNamara et al., 1995).

## Conclusion: Reconceptualising the Cute Hoor from Villain to Hero

One line of argument on the impact of such public service reform is that if the public sector becomes more streamlined and service-oriented, then it could be expected that citizens (customers) simply will not require such pervasive interventions by politicians. In time, they may even come to see them as a nuisance and wasteful. The counter argument is that clientelism can have an important and beneficial role in public service provision. The denigration and diminishing of that role may well result in poorer communication between citizen and state, with a consequently reduced quality of public service.

Both foreign and Irish analysts have suggested that the pattern of political involvement in routine, day-to-day public policy implementation will end. This expectation that clientelism will decline is largely based on theories of development and modernisation. These suppose that prosperity, education and experience of democratic institutions will so enhance citizens' civic competence that consumers of public services will become self-reliant. The assumption seems to be one of separating the public sector services and politicians, effectively mirroring a separation between policy-making and policy implementation.

New public managerialism must not oversimplify the separation of public service strategy formulation and implementation. An outright castigation of clientelism, for all its inefficiencies, is shown to be due more to underlying ethical or Weberian assumptions than to dispassionate observations. Here, again, we suggest that marketing and political science can gain insights from each other. In this case, marketing perspectives provide a useful corrective, and lead to more robust policy reforms.

Flynn (1997) identifies a number of themes in recent public management reforms:

> . . . from equality of treatment to different treatment of different people; from universal services to selection and more rationing;

> the promotion of a 'mixed economy' of provision of services by public, private and voluntary sector; some increase in choice for users of services; the development of stronger central policy control while allowing more local managerial autonomy and accountability or changes in funding regimes towards performance or competition (p. 6).

The major reasons for public sector reform are linked to economic liberalism, globalisation and national development strategies. The marketing literature, however, offers insights that are of relevance to the arguments advanced here. Changes in organisation structures reflect tensions between what may be referred to as standardisation and localisation. Those promoting a standardised approach claim benefits from economies of scale, improved management information, uniform brand appeal and so on. The emphasis of the local perspective is on the advantages of integration into their own markets.

In the public sector the concept of standardisation is evocative of the earlier ideal of universalism, which was central to the modernist project espoused by earlier social democrats and exemplified by the British National Health Service at its foundation in 1948. Standardisation and localisation are recognisable lines in many management and marketing scenarios. In Irish politics they are also reflected, even if not completely, in the debate about targeting social provision, means tests, service charges and the like as opposed to open access to services for whole categories of people.

The argument in this paper is that even though politicians may formally be allocated the function of standardising, they actually fulfil substantially the role of localisation. The evidence suggests that while the deputies, senators and councillors of Ireland are the ultimate decision makers, in practice they spend far more time seeking to influence the discretion of civil servants, local government and other agencies' bureaucrats. By the same token, many 'neutral' bureaucrats, in the course of careers in specialist areas, have a distinct policy agenda. While they may ostensibly be perceived as localisers, their influence over the standardisation process may be significant. Hence, the politicians have formal power over policy but seek to influence detail; the bureaucrats translate policy into detail but seek power over policy. The Irish system has been stable because each element has a different interpretation of power.

In O'Carroll's analysis of the cute hoors, he examines a second interpretation of their behaviour:

> . . . though neither idealised nor condemned, the behaviour involved was well recognised as being on the margins of social acceptability. The cuteness of the 'cute hoor' may imply sharp practice. This is generally not politically acceptable to the authorities. If all or part of the community support those ('the lads') who cock a snook at the establishment, they may be dubbed 'sneaking regarders' by the authorities. However, when the establishment seek to augment formal power by tapping informal channels, they signal their intention in language which is instantly recognised by those that might otherwise be called 'sneaking regarders' (O'Carroll, 1987: 83).

In other words, supporters of standardisation do not openly approve of local or individualised accommodation, but find that the cute hoors serve a useful function. Such may be regarded, in marketing terms, as market research, market testing, complaint management, refining implementation procedures and the like. The self-interest of politicians of appearing influential could be harnessed to the process of service delivery in ways analogous to the local manager of a multiple-outlet commercial operation. Occasional minor rule-bending, or irritating of headquarters on the customer's behalf, is presented by the likes of Gary Hamel, Tom Peters and such polemicists in the popular customer care literature as downright heroic! Similar behaviour by politicians in public service delivery is portrayed as anachronistic and unhelpful.

Political marketing must recognise the real focus of politicians. There are very few opportunities for politicians elected to office to engage in high-level policy development. Most are either in opposition or on the backbenches. Their work, therefore, is often at the coalface and most of it is directly related to the central task for the individual deputy – getting re-elected. But, despite this, the political science literature on marketing overwhelmingly stresses the formal election campaign, an atypical period of questionable impact on the outcome of the election. The formal campaign is unrepresentative of the reality of political marketing.

This article seeks a convergence of political marketing and public sector marketing by looking afresh at the role of an actor common to both. It also proposes that more realistic public sector reform will come from recognising the actual behaviour of politicians and designing systems to facilitate this than in a more prescriptive approach which takes as axiomatic the primacy of legislative activity. A good starting point is to recognise the cute hoor as hero.

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