

*Irish Government Re-Observed**

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"What may be needed also, though politicians in power are not likely to say so, is a more radical appraisal of the system from the point of view of its openness and of the respective roles of government and the Oireachtas. Parliaments in many democratic countries are apparently losing their position *vis-à-vis* governments, but Ireland's is a system in which the role of the Oireachtas has always been particularly attenuated in comparison with that of many other parliaments. Professor Brian Chapman (1963) wrote of Westminster that: "No European legislature is so restricted in its functions and so inhibited by lack of information as the Mother of Parliaments" and, he added, "comparatively speaking the Mother of Parliaments is a very weak old lady." So, too, is one of her older daughters-in-law now settled in Dublin."

IN this last paragraph of his most recent work (Chubb 1975) the doyen of Irish political scientists modifies only slightly a judgement originally advanced in 1964. At that time, prompted by Professor Brian Chapman's sharp observation of British government published the previous year, Professor Basil Chubb and David Thornley (1964) cast a cold eye over the operation of democratic processes in Ireland. *Irish Government Observed* offered one of the earliest critical surveys of the recruitment, role and performance of the Dáil deputy, the insufficiencies of Oireachtas procedures and facilities, the inadequacies of the bureaucracy and political parties in presenting real policy choices. It says much both for Chubb's perspicacity and for the inertia of Irish political life that, over a decade later, so many of the criticisms remain valid.

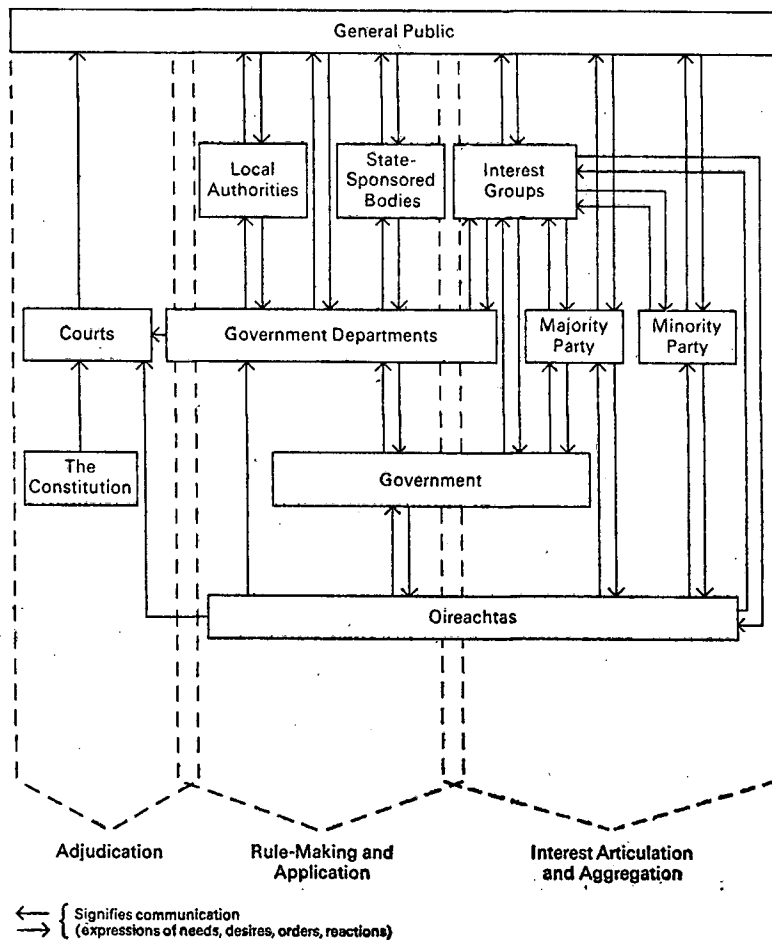
Much has happened in the intervening dozen years. The Republic has ex-

*Basil Chubb: *Cabinet Government in Ireland*, pp. 98, Dublin: The Institute of Public Administration, 1975, £1.50.

Ted Nealon: *Ireland: a Parliamentary Directory 1973-74*, pp. 240, Dublin: The Institute of Public Administration, 1974. £9.00.

perienced three general elections, changes in the leadership of the major political parties, an unprecedented internal government re-shuffle and the formation of a new coalition government. The upheaval which has transformed Northern governmental and political life has imposed new strains and demands on leadership in Dublin. Entry into the EEC has created a totally new context for public policy discussion and decision-making. The world outside this island—whether considered in terms of economic, strategic or ideological relationships—is far removed from the fragile optimism with which the early 1960s emerged from the discredited rhetoric of the Cold War. What remains remarkable about the Irish political system—in its personnel, procedures and structures—is the degree of continuity (some might say stagnancy) throughout this decade of change.

Fig. 1: The Political Process in the Cabinet System

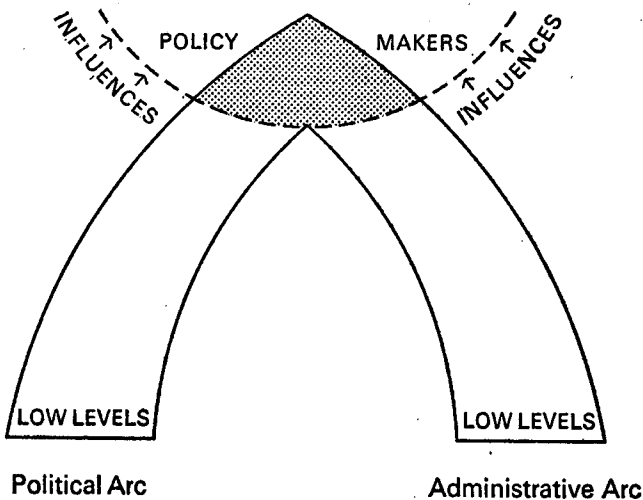


Source: Chubb (1974)

Certainly our knowledge and understanding of the system, pioneered so fruitfully by Chubb, has increased. The description of *Cabinet Government in Ireland* presented here is more elaborate and full than that offered in Chubb's (1961) original pamphlet. The functional analysis of G. A. Almond (1963) and British constitutional models of A. H. Birch (1973) are melded into a diagrammatic scheme of the Irish political process which successfully integrates interest groups and political parties with the more formal structures of government. (Figure 1) The point is carefully made that the government operates at a critical stage in the public decision-making process; that it occupies a strategic position at the confluence of streams of advice, demands and proposals; that the personnel of the cabinet "are at once party leaders, parliamentary leaders of the commanding Dáil majority, and ministerial heads of department". (Chubb, 1974, p. 17.) This central location of the government in the Irish system is later reinforced by reference to Professor Peter Self's figure of the political-administrative arch (Figure 2) where the shaded junction:

represents the critical point at which political will flows into and energises the administrative system: and it is also the point at which influences that have been generated *within* the administrative process flow back into the higher levels of the political process. There is thus, at the apex of the arch, a fusion of political and administrative influences which have been generated lower down the two arcs. (Self, 1972, pp. 150-1, quoted in Chubb, 1974, p. 68.)

Fig. 2: *The Political-Administrative Arch*



Source: Self (1972)

At the same time, Chubb notes that this key group of policy-makers in the Irish system is particularly small in number and constrained by their own socialisation within the political culture.

One of the major obstacles to the development of political studies in Ireland has been the extraordinary secretiveness surrounding the work and life of this small, multi-functional elite. At one level this inhibition reflects the passion for executive secrecy which is an inherited and entrenched tradition of the Irish public service. What began as a perfectly proper concern to preserve confidentiality has been erected into a dogma which rejects all outside eyes as intrusive. A distinguished and experienced student of, and participant in, the Irish bureaucracy has characterised the attitude in terms of a department "protecting its most common-place file as if it contained the sole surviving title-deeds to a private utopia". (Lynch, 1969, p. 21.)¹ Three instances might be quoted to illustrate the situation: data from surveys commissioned by the Devlin review group on the public service have never been published; even the most powerful of the Dáil's committees, the Public Accounts Committee, has, on occasions, had considerable difficulty in extracting relevant information; there is still no regular mechanism or time rule releasing papers to the public archives or permitting scholars access to them. The result is that we have no way of checking, even for the 1920s, the minutes of government decisions, the record (if any) of the ministerial meetings which are the Irish equivalent of the British Cabinet committees, or of the memoranda which accompany proposals listed on government agenda. Chubb's three chapters on the development of the Irish cabinet system are, therefore, necessarily dependent in large measure on secondary sources, themselves derived mainly from interviews with former ministers long after the events described have passed.

For it is not only the lack of official documentation which impedes research. Political participants themselves have been remarkably reticent. No political autobiography has been published since the foundation of the state. Apart from T. de Vere White's (1948) *Kevin O'Higgins* and the series of biographies of Eamon de Valera, there are no "life and times" volumes for reference.

This blanket of silence may be due, in part, to the professional longevity of the first group of senior politicians. Four of Mr de Valera's original 1932 government were still in office when he retired as Taoiseach in 1959 and Mr Aiken continued to serve as minister until 1969. When the first Inter-Party government was formed in 1948, after 16 years unbroken rule by Fianna Fáil, the government included two members of the Cumann na nGaedheal executive council of the 1920s and a former Attorney-General; after a similar 16 year period in Opposition in 1973 the National Coalition government included two ministers from the second Inter-Party cabinet. In the small world of Irish politics, the experience of such extended career expectations is not likely to encourage the publication of memoirs which might be regarded as indiscreet and damaging to future prospects.

1. In answer to a Parliamentary Question on 19 February 1975 (*Dáil Debates*, vol. 278, cols. 829 ff.) the Taoiseach indicated that greater access to archival material was being considered.

This is not merely a matter of preserving one's own position. There is also the strong pull of familial loyalty encouraging the cult of confidentiality at the top. Since 1922 only 79 men have held ministerial office; a significant number of the more recent incumbents are sons or close relatives of the earlier elite. In the Lynch government of 1969 six of the 14 members were sons of former deputies and two of the four new ministers appointed in the cabinet re-shuffle of May 1970 were relatives of former deputies. An examination of the National Coalition government of 16 (including the Attorney-General) reveals that five are sons of former deputies—three of whom held ministerial office—and two others are related by marriage to former ministers.

This "hereditary" aspect of modern Irish governmental recruitment reflects a more general characteristic of Irish national representation, documented in some earlier studies. Mr Ted Nealon's (1974) magnificently produced and meticulously detailed *Directory* is a major, welcome and valuable addition to this literature. It goes far beyond any work so far attempted since the earliest series of Flynn's (1928) *Oireachtas Companions* and in production and content is far in advance of comparable British and American reference works. Complete details of all counts for Dáil, Seanad, Northern Ireland and presidential elections are accompanied by constituency maps and party tabulations; biographies and photographs of all successful candidates present the first comprehensive Irish political *Who's Who*. This is a handsome, if expensive, landmark in the compilation of Irish political facts and provides an opportunity to place the contemporary Dáil personnel into a comparative context. Some of the data for the 1973 general election have been organised in tabular form, others have to be culled from the detailed biographies. For convenience, some of these new data are collated with earlier findings below.²

The turn-over in personnel in 1973 was smaller than in the 1969 general election. Seven outgoing deputies did not offer themselves for re-election as against 26 in 1969 and only 28 new deputies were elected (six of whom had been members prior to 1969) as against 43 new deputies in 1969. This slowing-down in the rate of replacement is reflected in a slight raising of the age level of the Dáil in Table 1.

TABLE 1: *Percentage of deputies aged 45 and over, 1961-73*

1961	1965	1969	1973
61	60	52.5	55.5

2. In subsequent discussion and tables McCracken (1958, Chapter VII, "The Composition of the Dáil") is used for data prior to 1948; Whyte (1966) for data on 1961 and 1965; and Farrell (1971) for data on 1969.

This compares with a figure of 45 per cent in the 1922 Dáil and of 75 per cent in 1948.

The flattening out of the middle-aged groupings which was a feature of the 19th Dáil has reverted to an earlier pattern, with the 40-year-old group contributing over a third of the membership. There is a sharp decline in the number of deputies in their twenties from the two previous general elections:

TABLE 2: *Percentage of deputies by age-group in 4 Dála, 1961-1973*

<i>Age-group</i>	<i>1961</i>	<i>1965</i>	<i>1969</i>	<i>1973</i>
20-29	3	6	6	2
30-39	19	20	25	24
40-49	32	31	27	35
50-59	24	24	27	24
60-69	15	14	12	12
70-79	6	5	3	3

A comparison of the age-structure of the 19th and 20th Dáil by political parties (Table 3) indicates the extent to which Labour representation has come into line with that of the two larger parties. It might also be noted that Fianna Fáil's dependence on older representatives has already been rectified in part by the three by-elections held since 1973, however in the Dublin area the party elected only three deputies in their thirties and none in their twenties as against two in their seventies and at least two in their sixties.³

TABLE 3: *Percentage of deputies by age-group and political party, 1969-73*

<i>Political party and year</i>	<i>Age-group</i>						<i>N</i>
	<i>20-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>40-49</i>	<i>50-59</i>	<i>60-69</i>	<i>70-79</i>	
Fianna Fáil 1969	7	23	28	25	13	4	75
1973	3	23	33	22	14	4	69
Fine Gael 1969	8	24	30	24	12	2	50
1973	2	22	41	26	7	2	54
Labour 1969	0	39	17	39	5	0	18
1973	0	32	26	26	16	0	19

3. One of the Dublin deputies for Fianna Fáil escaped Mr Nealon's net, as did a Fine Gael deputy from Cork and dates of birth are not given.

The localism which has been such a persistent characteristic of Irish representation is tabulated in Nealon's (1974, p. 121; see also Farrell, 1971, p. 314) analysis of the residence of deputies and shows little change from the 1965 and 1969 figures. There is no specific break-down by birth-place but an examination of the detailed biographies indicates that these, too, are in line with earlier findings. Nor is there any marked difference in educational levels; for convenience, comparable figures for the last four elections, by party, are given in Table 4.

TABLE 4: *Percentages of deputies attaining different levels of education by party, 1961-1973*

	<i>Fianna Fáil</i>				<i>Fine Gael</i>				<i>Labour</i>			
	1961	1965	1969	1973	1961	1965	1969	1973	1961	1965	1969	1973
Primary	17	15	13	10	15	19	8	7	50	32	5	5
Second level	54	56	47	51	49	40	50	50	44	55	50	53
Third level	29	29	40	39	36	40	42	43	6	14	45	37

An examination of the detailed biographies shows that 49 of the 144 deputies elected in 1973 had spent time at Christian Brothers schools (representing 40 per cent of those who had attended secondary or third-level institutions); while the figure is high it does not compare with the dominance of the Christian Brothers in the civil service (see Ó Mathúna 1955 and Cohan, 1972, pp. 31-32). By comparison, 54 per cent of deputies with university and professional education have attended University College, Dublin and another five deputies have participated in the adult education programmes of that College.⁴

A change is evident in the analysis of Dáil deputies by occupation. This is a notoriously difficult variable to quantify since so many deputies have multiple interests. Exact comparison with earlier data is difficult since Nealon does not differentiate members of the government from other deputies and does not list full-time politicians as a special category but allocates members according to their previous occupations. However he does seem to point to a large increase in the number of full-time politicians and suggests that 65 members of the present Dáil fall into this category. Before accepting that this indicates some new trend in 1973 two reservations should be noted. First, the numbers given previously in Whyte and Farrell may be somewhat underestimated (on the other hand, it is not clear that all teachers in the past found it necessary to relinquish their occupation, as suggested by Nealon). Second, the increase must be related to the fact that with a change of government a number of Opposition deputies began a new parliamentary session as full-time politicians; it does not follow that this full-time

4. A number of other deputies list attendance at adult programmes run by the two other colleges of the NUI.

commitment will be maintained, although it seems reasonable to assume that the over-all trend towards professionalism will be continued.

A number of conventional "routes of entry" to the Dáil already identified in the literature can be supplemented by information in this 1973 volume. The earliest avenue, participation in the national liberation movement, has almost disappeared. As late as 1948, 43 per cent of deputies could still claim a "national record"; time has diminished the numbers as Table 5 shows.

TABLE 5: *Number of deputies participating actively in the independence movement*

	1961	1965	1969	1973
N	27	15	6	4

However, it might be noted that one of these veterans entered the Dáil as late as 1969 (although he had contested a seat on three previous occasions, the first time in 1933) and another in 1961.

Family succession, or at least close family relationship, with former ministers, deputies and senators remains significant. I have corrected the figures in Nealon slightly⁵ to give the following break-down:

Sons of former deputies	31
Daughters do.	1
Widows do.	4
Sons of former senators	2
Nephews of former TDs	4
Relatives through marriage	3
Total	45

Nealon distinguished between half of this number who are in a direct line of succession, i.e. immediately filling vacancies created by the death or retirement of a father (13), another member of the family (2), or within the same area within a period of five years, from those who were elected after a longer time period (3) and those (9) elected to "non-family" seats. He also documents the continuing emphasis on service on local authorities among Dáil deputies. Similarly, the detailed biographies again reveal the importance of prominence in sport, and conspicuously in GAA sports, for successful Dáil candidates.

It is only against this detailed background of a parliamentary representation which is local, familial and competitive that government domination of the Dáil

5. To include Deputy J. Gibbons (a nephew) and Deputy P. Cooney (a nephew-in-law).

can be understood. In his short chapter on "Government and the Dáil", Chubb (1974, p. 59) seems to suggest that changes in Dáil personnel have created rather greater opportunities for "give and take" between leaders and followers and insists, quite rightly that "false impressions are created if one examines only the *public proceedings* of the Dáil". On the other hand, this scarcely justifies the extraordinary subservience of the two houses of the Oireachtas to the will of the executive. Just how complete that control has become is examined in a recent article by Alan J. Ward (1974) which might be read in conjunction with Chubb's work. Certainly a comparison of Irish parliamentary procedures with those of other "daughters-in-law" of the Mother of Parliaments suggests that the enfeeblement of the Dáil is neither necessary nor inevitable. Indeed, any re-observation of Irish Government in the mid-seventies must conclude, in Ward's words (1974, p. 243; see also Robinson, 1974, Sinnott 1975) that:

At the present time, the various opportunities for debate and scrutiny in Dáil Éireann, and the opportunities and facilities available to deputies do very little to alter the fact that the powers of the Dáil are excessively limited and the style of politics in the Dáil is excessively partisan . . . if there are to be changes, the Irish government, in the name of good government, is going to have to take the initiative. All the experience of Irish politics suggests that this is simply not going to happen. Ireland will continue to govern itself with one arm tied behind its back.

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