

Values

Refreshing damaging public-sector reform, with renewal. By **Rachel Mullen**



“It’s not a great mission statement, but we’ll revise it if things get better.”

PUBLIC-sector services are different: they are supposed to serve the public good and its values. The citizen should have a sense of ownership of, and entitlement to, them. Cutbacks and public-sector reform have, however, crowded out any sense of difference. The clamour for aggressive reorientation, led by certain quarters of the press and their pundits, has been cacophonous.

In 2008, just before the crisis took hold, an Institute of Public Administration paper by Muiris MacCarthaigh identified a range of values associated with public service. These were “efficiency, impartiality, honesty, loyalty, risk-aversion, equity, hierarchy, integrity, accountability and fairness”. He found that new non-traditional values were occasionally identified by public-sector officials, including flexibility, value for money and effectiveness. Some values, such as innovation, that he expected in the context of modernisation did not emerge. The ‘pecking order’ of values was seen to have changed as part of the modernisation of the public services. Many public servants reported that accountability was now

the dominant value in their work. Efficiency, in the sense of speedy service delivery, had grown in importance.

Public-sector reform has never been too explicit about what new values it offers. Yet it is, more than anything else, an exercise in changing public sector’s values. Modernisation has involved the incorporation of private-sector values and the pursuit of a market-led public sector. As the new values associated with this modernisation take hold other more traditional public-sector values inevitably give way and disappear.

Public-sector reform and its private-sector value-base predate austerity. The 1996 ‘Delivering Better Government’ strategy identified ‘equity’ and ‘integrity’ as core values of the public service; and at the apex. However, it noted that values of professionalism, openness, flexibility, impartiality and customer orientation are integral to the public service. Austerity has provided the cover for a further reinforcement of such values. The Public Sector Reform Plan 2011-2014 emphasises efficiency, productivity and cost-reduction. Value-for-money has been established as the

dominant public-sector value.

This shifting ethic makes a difference. Every decision that an organisation makes and every action taken by its employees will reflect the value system of that organisation. Values are central to the development of the culture of an organisation, what it stands for, how it operates, and what it might prioritise. New and old values can end up in conflict with each other. Value for money, for example, that is concerned with productivity, can diminish values of equity and fairness. The vogueish move to recognising its public as ‘customers’ can be to the detriment to seeing them as the holders of rights.

MacCarthaigh concluded that “whatever values are deemed to be appropriate for the public service, the evidence suggests that performance will be enhanced through their meaningful integration into all aspects of the work of the service”. He captures the importance of values, however, he is mistaken to be so agnostic about what those values might be.

We need to move away from market-based values for public service if we are to secure public services that better match and meet the needs of our diverse citizenry. Public sector reform has addressed values head-on. Now we need public-sector renewal to address the damage that the reform has done. The renewal too must be value-driven.

The recent introduction of obligations of equality and human rights for the public bodies should be central to this renewal. Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 requires public bodies, including government departments, to proactively consider and address equality and human rights issues that are relevant to their functions.

The values of dignity, inclusion, autonomy, social justice and democracy underpin equality and human rights. A strategic and funded drive is now required to centralise and implement this public-sector duty. This would refresh and bolster a public service that could stand central to a more equal Ireland. •

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