

## **Governance Forum Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> March**

**- Brian Cawley, Director General, IPA**

### **Learning from governance failures**

It is appropriate, at the end of a very interesting, and insightful discussion, to reflect for a few minutes on what we learn from these events, from these failures in governance. How often do we ask the question after another difficulty comes to the fore –what have we learned? I won't say I have had the good fortune, but I have had the opportunity to be part of investigations into a number of these events over the years, such as the Crypto outbreak in Galway City, the breast cancer misdiagnosis in the midlands, the social and other issues in Southill and Moyross. I have also had the opportunity to talk to a range of public servants as part of researching these issues.

So briefly, and based on this experience, I want to share with you a few ideas related to learning from governance failures. Because clearly if we do not learn from these events we run the serious risk of repeating them. One thing I can say for sure is that there are always early warning signs, but they may at the time seem insignificant. This is also related to the fact that many crises can be heavily dependent on context, or more specifically changed context. In relation to public policy the failure to constantly audit the context within which schemes, programmes, and organisation norms generally, operate can end up making people looking at the least very foolish and at worst even reckless.

What I found out about learning may not necessarily cheer us up, because it revealed some of the real challenges in learning from these failures, but also revealed the complex interaction between rules and procedures on the one hand, and culture, attitudes, and behaviours on the other. Firstly it is perhaps important to say that it is almost always more difficult for any of us to learn from what is perceived to be a failure than from what is seen as a success- for example we generally prefer to share best practice than worst practice. To suggest that we can learn from failure has to start with some admission of potential weakness. And yet some of the most important and useful learning can result from looking at things that have gone wrong.

On this note it was interesting for me that as I spoke to many senior public servants about learning from governance failures in another organization, there was often a sense of invulnerability, that it could not happen to us because of the different approaches or style of management, because they were different, and so on. Admitting to any vulnerability is all the more difficult in a system that pounces on any perceived weakness of public servants and this in itself represents a real barrier to learning. We need to find ways to discuss and explore risks and failures in public service organizations in a way that is neither a 'tick box exercise' nor simply a search for scapegoats.

### **Governance failures are now very much constructed as media events**

Another important point that has been mentioned this morning is that these governance failures are now very much constructed as media events. One commentator has noted that "the institutional and personal drama of public service scandal now has high entertainment value". Public service governance failures are events insofar as they have a very discernible life cycle- they start with revelation, develop a narrative, and then generally taper off as something else takes their place in the spotlight. There is a dominant narrative, and currently most public service governance failures are played out within a narrative that involves uncaring, inefficient and unaccountable public service quangos or Departments that are careless of taxpayers money. For many, particularly the public, this narrative represents the truth. The problem is that there are often very many versions of the truth held by many different people, we just don't get to hear all of them. In a variety of the cases I worked with, while a particular version of the truth dominated the media and often drove the official learning, this was not a truth that was shared across the system. In particular many I spoke to believed that investigations into failures frequently took insufficient account of the dynamic complexity and context that faces decision makers as they look forward, as compared to the relatively simple black and white world we see when we look back. While we may or may not agree with that, the important point is that in these situations there is rarely agreement about not alone the causes of failure, but even the fact of failure itself. Where these different perspectives are not taken account of, there is little chance of real learning happening. We need to find

ways of getting these different interpretations out in the open without simply dismissing anything that challenges the dominant narrative as mere defensiveness.

It is also important to note that these failures often have both administrative and political consequences. The perceived failures of the public service are increasingly used as a stick to beat government. Therefore, and this is true in most western democracies, in the aftermath of failure there is an immediate attempt to contain and limit the potential damage and to restore order and confidence in the system. Official inquiries, reports and so on that follow governance failures are often as much about restoring confidence in the basic soundness of the system, and seeking to show that whatever failure has happened is an aberration, as they are about seeking the truth. Typically an inquiry will be set up, a set of recommendations will be made, a new set of guidelines or a new circular issued. This approach reflects what might be termed an optimistic perspective on failure, a perspective that believes the system is generally sound and working well, and that with the application of these new rules and standards mistakes will not be repeated.

### **Rules and regulations play ‘catch up’ on a system that is ever-changing**

A more troubling perspective, and one that I found shared by many of the stakeholders I spoke to, is that because of the sheer complexity of the systems that we have created there is a significant and growing potential for problems to arise. The reality is that the rules and regulations play ‘catch up’ on a system that is ever-changing, and that there are always new sets of circumstances that arise, variations on the themes that have gone before, and these are the ones that will cause us difficulty in the future. So from a learning perspective even though it is easier and simpler to find scapegoats, partly because “victims find it easier to bear their misfortune if they can see injustice as well as bad luck”, the reality is that these governance failures are almost always systemic, the result of complex interactions between various combinations of human behaviour, rules, organizational context, technology, political systems and media attention. This is not to suggest that we should not demand individual accountability but rather that in addition we must face the fact that while it may be comforting to attribute individual blame, the

more troubling reality is that we may need to look at how collectively we set things up for failure, and seek to learn from that.

**The practice of public service is a profoundly moral pursuit.**

It may even be to suggest that the accretion of more and more rules and regulations over time could even contribute to the potential for failure. Indeed one final point I would make is this. At various times certain beliefs and views about organizational life, and public administration, come to dominate. As we know these things tend to come in cycles. For almost the past two decades the reform of public administration has been dominated by the perspective of new public management, a perspective that urges the public administration to learn from practice in the private sector, that has been dominated by the language of efficiency, human resource management, financial management, performance management, agency creation for more efficient delivery, and so on. There has been much good about this. Now many of you will be familiar with the IPA journal *Administration*, and it actually pre-dated the establishment of the Institute in 1957. It in turn reflects the thinking and the issues that have dominated debate over the decades. The interesting thing for me as I recently reviewed some of the early editions is that back in late 50s and the 60s there were a very significant number of articles by senior public servants and others that focused specifically on ethics and values in public administration. On the other hand in the past decade the articles have tended to be more about those issues of performance and efficiency and measurement, the themes of NPM. Important and all as these topics are I wonder might this reflect a shift in emphasis away from issues that remain absolutely fundamental to the sound development of public policy and delivery of public services. In 1957 one of the contributors to *Administration* argued that “the science of ethics, of natural law, the principles of justice and morality, a philosophy of man, are all indispensable to the adequately trained senior public servant” reminding us of the fact that then as now the practice of public service is a profoundly moral pursuit.