

Book Review: Governing Ireland: From Cabinet Government to Delegated Governance by Eoin O'Malley and Muiris MacCarthaigh

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*The structures of Irish government were once considered reliably stable and efficient, but the economic crash of 2008 swept away all such sureties. How did those in government fail to foresee the challenges and avert a crisis that has undermined the state in many respects? **Liz Carolan** finds that **Governing Ireland** maintains a considered, confident and probing air, collecting together the personal and surprisingly outspoken analysis of the country's top political scientists.*



Governing Ireland: From Cabinet Government to Delegated Governance. Eoin O'Malley and Muiris MacCarthaigh. IPA. March 2012. 312 pages.

Ireland is going through a period of deep economic turmoil. Politicians and politics have born a large proportion of the blame for what occurred in the lead up to, and fallout from, the crash; but what of the system of Government?

What role have structures played, if any, in the formation of the crises – the ministerial appointments processes, regulatory oversight, civil service incentive structures, the policy making process, the centre of Government, relations with Europe? At the [Institute for Government](#), my colleagues and I spend much of our workdays attempting to examine and explain how systems such as these work, under the presumption that they might be done better. In this ambitious book [Eoin O'Malley](#), [Muiris MacCarthaigh](#) et. al. set out to do something similar, with the added dimension of understanding the machinery of government's role in bringing about the biggest test faced by the Irish State since its foundation.

In a way, this is really three books. Firstly, it is a book that attempts to plug a gap in the literature by providing a definitive introduction to the Irish system of government. It aims to rectify the fact that "there are few full, comprehensive treatments of the governing process in Ireland", which have included "a good empirical understanding of cabinet government". Where some have tried, "civil and public service failed to attract detailed academic treatment".

This edited volume covers all of these bases quite well. It manages to explain the basics required by an overseas comparative political scientist or a researcher seeking an international case study in relatively straight forward language. Journalists will likewise find it informative and, in the main, readable. In particular they might like the concise "Glossary of Irish Terms" which explains, translates, and even gives a pronunciation guide for the main governance vocabulary (*tee-shuck*, *fee-an-a faw* etc.).

Having said that, this book is second of all a piece of academic political science literature. As such it goes into deeper detail about the historical background and significance of various parts of the government machine, and then attempts to explain and understand them within the theoretical frameworks of the science. Bagehot, Hood, Dunleavy and even Machiavelli and DeTocqueville are evoked; the system of "agencification" is examined within the paradigm of New Public Management.



However the most important, third, contribution this text makes is collecting together the personal and surprisingly outspoken analysis of the country's top political scientists. In each chapter, the authors cannot contain judgement, their opinion, their prescription for how things went wrong, and how they might be better. This is by no means a flaw.

Take the chapter on the Department of Finance. It begins with "the historical narrative" – explaining the constitutional and legislative foundations of the department, before covering off on its role, responsibilities and composition. It goes on to outline the role of the Department in the banking and fiscal crises, concluding that "it is clear that the system failed", and that the prospect of proposed reforms working are "worrying" and "a concern". Meanwhile the chapter argues that the Department's "strong sense of institutional pride" is most likely "misplaced".

While some edited volumes can feel like the recycled or disconnected work of academics, this book maintains a considered, timely and probing air. A discussion of the role of the centre in the controversial Bank Guarantee Scheme, for example, states that "what we were told... now seems hopelessly optimistic" before posing the rhetorical questions clearly frustrating the author and his colleagues "how can the cabinet do its job if it doesn't have access to good information? How can the opposition do its job if the information it receives is misleading or inaccurate?"

Governing Ireland is a book of the moment, and it will be interesting to see if it stands up to the test of time. But it does a great job of describing with the confidence of experts a subject matter in flux and whose future is uncertain. This confidence is its greatest strength, and it is a pleasure to read an informed and opinionated book by experts seeking to inform, to challenge and to promote change.

Liz Carolan has been working at the [Institute for Government](#) since October 2010. Her research has focused on the international comparison of ministers and cabinets, the role of senior experts in the development of health policy, and the selection of candidates to be MPs. She recently received a postgraduate degree from the London School of Economics, having spent a number of years doing research and development work with civil society and academic organisations in Ireland, the Balkans and Australia. [Read more reviews by Liz.](#)

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