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All Changed, Changed Utterly: The Irish Defence Forces Culture of Change Management

Tom Clonan

Dublin Institute of Technology, tomclonan@gmail.com

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All changed – changed utterly

President-elect Barack Obama's mandate for the US Presidency was predicated on one simple word – 'Change'. The simplicity of the word, and of his campaign slogan – 'Yes We Can' – belies the complex task of managing change within a dynamic and turbulent fiscal and security environment. Only time will tell whether or not President Obama and his cabinet have the individual and collective skill-sets required to deal with the challenges for change that confront them.

Closer to home, the Irish government is also confronted with radical change as it applies to the domestic and international fiscal environment. The Irish banking and financial services sector along with construction and property development have proven especially vulnerable in the current global credit crisis. Amid rising unemployment and shrinking revenue receipts, the main focus of the electorate to date has been on the ability of the government to demonstrate clear and decisive leadership – the ability to confront the crisis, manage change and drive the necessary structural and institutional transformations required for renewed prosperity and growth.

In this context, the Irish public service finds itself the subject of some hostile scrutiny of late with some commentators branding it variously as 'overstaffed' or 'bloated' and 'highly resistant to change'. Whilst these charges are unfounded as they apply to the public service in general, they are particularly wide of the mark as they apply to the Defence Forces. Indeed, the Defence Forces might be seen as a model for best practice in the manner in which it has downsized and transformed itself to meet the unprecedented fiscal and security challenges that have arisen in the first decade of the 21st century.

Despite being an institution almost as old as the state itself, the Defence Forces has always been a fluid organisational entity – perhaps uniquely among state bodies - and has been subject to constant change and transformation since its inception. During the 1920s the organisation transformed itself from an irregular guerrilla force to a formally established and expanded Free State Army. After a period of contraction during the 1930s, following the Civil War, Oglaiġ na hEireann expanded once more in the 1940s directly as a consequence of the Second World War.

Shrinking after the Emergency, the organisation again expanded briefly during the 1970s in response to the 'Troubles'. The PDF's most significant historical development during the post-war period came when the organisation was deployed overseas for the first time on UN peace enforcement and peacekeeping missions – roles which have proven to be the primary definers of the organisation in terms of public perceptions of it and its place within the national consciousness. This UN service – undertaken by the ordinary men and women of the PDF – has in turn proven to be a primary definer of Ireland's image abroad as a nation state. The service and sacrifice of Irish soldiers abroad has contributed significantly to Ireland's status as a world player diplomatically. The political capital and foreign policy leverage that Irish military service overseas has generated should not be underestimated.

Despite these changes during the 20th century – all as a result of external stimuli – the greatest transformation in the history of the Defence Forces in its history has, arguably, taken place during the first decade of the 21st century. During this period, from 2000 to date, the Defence Forces has downsized and transformed itself in a

series of rapid and profound paradigm shifts in organisational, strategic and tactical doctrine. These fundamental changes have been driven by the professional core of the organisation – its commissioned officers – in order to effect the PDF's integration into EU and NATO/PfP structures and in order to conform to major UN reform and tectonic shifts in the international security environment. Despite these dramatic changes, many stakeholders and opinion leaders external to the organisation including politicians and academics – across the widest spectrum of Irish society - are not fully aware of their scope and significance.

The specific primary drivers for this change within the Irish Defence Forces during the last decade include the 2000 White Paper on Defence, UN reform - principally by way of the Brahimi Report - Ireland's membership of NATO/PfP, EU security and Defence developments and the pattern and growth of global terrorism. Whilst these latest stimuli for change have been external to the organisation - the full repertoire of the PDF's organisational responses have been evolved internally by military officers themselves. Unlike many organisations in the private or public sector – who would rarely face such daunting challenges in any event – in this case, due to the collective expertise and leadership qualities of its officer corps, the state did not find it necessary to contract expensive external consultants or expert advisory groups in order to successfully reconfigure the PDF.

The expertise and mobilisation for the current transformation has come almost exclusively from within the organisation itself. For the taxpayer, this has represented a major cost benefit. The Defence Forces are probably the first cohort within the public service to achieve such major organic change – concurrent with exponential growth in levels of service provision - with no net increase in cost to the public purse. The result has been the successful overhaul and enhancement of a vital public service with no interruption to an ever-expanding suite of military commitments – in a cost neutral manner. These dramatic changes have been facilitated in no small way by the contribution of RACO who have been instrumental in maintaining coherence, relevance, fairness and value for money to the change agenda.

The way in which the PDF has managed its own recent transformation provides a template for best practice for change management for the remainder of the public service – and by extension the wider private sector. Indeed organisations as diverse as the HSE or Aer Lingus might take note of the way in which the PDF have reconfigured themselves of late to meet growing service level demands and to promote excellence at all levels of the organisation in a challenging and unforgiving environment.

Quantitatively, the impact of the change agenda on the day to day operations and capabilities of the PDF have been dramatic. The UN's *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*, (2000) - known as the Brahimi Report – made many recommendations on mandates for UN missions, rules of engagement and force capability. Consistent with parallel developments within the US military – particularly the post-Cold War US 'Defence Capability Initiative' (DCI) programme – and NATO's move from the strategic doctrine of massed formations toward NATO Reaction Forces (NRFs), the Brahimi report's recommendations effectively necessitate the creation of a system of international rapid reaction forces configured in Brigade sized formations to be known as Battlegroups. Such rapid reaction forces or

Battlegroups – as implied by the Brahimi report – would be of optimal value to the UN if available on a continuous standby footing and on a regional or subsidiary basis.

The UN - mindful of its inability to act meaningfully to prevent genocide in Rwanda in 1994 or in Srebrenica in the former Yugoslavia in 1995 – required an urgent response for its requirement for regional, subsidiary formations or ‘oven ready’ Battlegroups for global crises. For the PDF to move towards this model of mobilisation – deployable at short notice and ready to engage in combat operations or peace enforcement duties as part of a UN-mandated regional military Battlegroup – was consistent with the Irish Government’s 2000 White Paper stated aim of ensuring that ‘Ireland has a world class military organisation to enable to Defence Forces to meet the requirements of Government in the changing national and international sphere’. The political challenges for such collaboration however were significant. Apart from the training, doctrinal or even logistics challenges associated with such a change in modus operandi for the PDF - Ireland’s participation in any regional Battlegroup would also have to be consistent with Ireland’s policy of neutrality and the ‘triple lock’ mechanism for UN, Government and Dail approval for the deployment of Irish troops overseas.

Despite these challenges and principally due to the efforts of the military authorities, by January 2008, Ireland was in a position to contribute troops to the Nordic Battle Group and successfully completed all of the necessary training and liaison for a six month tour of duty with the NBG which concluded in June of 2008. In addition, the PDF successfully participated in a number of UN mandated EU led peace enforcement missions such as EUFOR’s mission to Bosnia Herzegovina and more recently the UN-mandated EUFOR Chad-CAR mission to Chad. In addition to the influence of Irish troops in a ‘boots on the ground’ capacity at the Force level in Chad itself, the PDF have also achieved a significant footprint at Operational Headquarters level at Mont Valerian in Paris with the appointment of Lt Gen Pat Nash as Operational Commander of EUFOR Chad-Car.

Along with the cohort of Irish officers present at senior levels in Paris, the PDF have also managed to gain and maintain a significant and highly influential foothold at EUMS in Brussels. By being directly involved in the planning and shaping of EU missions and interventions abroad, officers of the PDF have made an invaluable contribution to the military and political influence, directly and indirectly that Ireland can wield in Europe. By being involved at EUMS, Irish officers have brought a unique and pro-social influence to bear on our EU counterparts at the level of the EUMS, the EU Military Committee, the EU Political and Security Committee and by extension the EU Council of Ministers. Aside from the quantitative differences to PDF operations that EU involvement have brought about, our integration into EU structures has made a vital qualitative difference to the political influence that the Irish government can bring to bear on EU foreign policy matters. In short, in my view the PDF’s involvement at EU level has allowed Ireland to give meaningful expression – perhaps for the first time in the history of the state – to our military neutrality in terms of the influence Irish officers can bring to bear on the nature and scope of EU military interventions and in terms of the political traction that such involvement provides. The political capital and foreign policy leverage that contemporary Irish military service at the EU has generated should not be underestimated.

In parallel with these developments, the PDF continued to shoulder its workload with regard to more robustly configured and rapidly deployed 'blue-helmet' UN missions. The PDF deployment to Liberia in 2003 was a prime example of this ongoing commitment with a force of 400 Irish successfully deployed to Monrovia within 2 months of the initial reconnaissance by PDF personnel. The Irish participation as UNMIL's Quick Reaction Force was completely successful – despite the volatile nature of the political and security situation in Liberia and the robust nature of the UN mandate there.

It is worth noting here – once more - that this successful deployment took place during a period of readjustment and re-calibration of the PDF towards the model of rapid mobilisation envisaged by Brahimi and Kofi Anan at the beginning of the decade. It also took place concurrent with the remarkably successful integration of senior officers of the PDF into the highest levels of a newly configured and rapidly emergent EUMS. In a remarkably short space of time, the PDF had gone from being peacekeepers primarily contracted to one international agency – the UN – to one of rapidly deployable peace enforcers, with multidisciplinary specialties contracting successfully to a variety of international agencies including the UN, the EU and NATO/PfP. It would be difficult, if not impossible to highlight any other Irish public or private enterprise whose roles have expanded as significantly in such a short period of time and with the same level of operational effectiveness and emphasis on excellence as maintained by the PDF.

The parallel integration of PDF personnel into NATO/PfP structures during this period has been both seamless and remarkably successful given the rate and pace of organisational change undertaken by the organisation in terms of its concurrent integration into EU military structures. Senior officers of the PDF have integrated well into their NATO/PfP roles at SHAPE, NATO Headquarters in Brussels and in UN mandated, NATO led operations in the field. Aside from the outstanding collective contributions made by PDF personnel to NATO peace enforcement missions in Kosovo and Afghanistan – individual officers such as Brigadier General Gerry Hegarty have proven that Irish officers are capable of the most complex leadership tasks within NATO at the highest levels of that organisation.

For officers, the primary professional cadre within Ireland's defence establishment, the cumulative net effects of this change have been significant. Due to increasing overseas commitments, the tempo of foreign assignments for officers has increased exponentially. For example, at time of writing, 25% of officers at the rank of Lt Col are serving overseas at any one time. This operational tempo is exacerbated for all officers by the amount of time – averaging 15 years over the service life of an officer – of de-facto Monday to Friday separation from families arising from residential duties, military courses and appointments to military installations throughout the state itself. The highly mobile, flexible and multi-tasked nature of service life as a professional officer in the PDF – whilst it matches those prescriptions for excellence contained within management and leadership textbooks – extracts a heavy toll from the family lives of serving officers.

Despite these many challenges, the officer corps – like the organisation itself - is successfully transforming itself by a process of reflective professionalism facilitated by the MA in Leadership Studies co-hosted by the Command and Staff School of the

Military College and NUI Maynooth. Any future White Paper on Defence would do well to recognise the value of this core group of professionals and their unique contribution as senior public servants to the unprecedented levels of change and value for money achieved within the Irish defence sector. It would be a retrograde and illogical step to reduce or in any way diminish by way of status or numbers this core group of professionals – central to the successful facilitation of change or the required rapid expansion of the PDF in any future man-made or natural crisis.

At a time of much discussion on the nature of change and the new fiscal and security challenges that confront Ireland domestically and internationally – the PDF surely represents a case study in best practice in transformation and change. This quiet revolution within the PDF has taken place in a largely cost-neutral manner. Indeed over the last 10 years or so, the numbers of personnel serving in the defence forces has dropped by almost 20%. The leaner, fitter, modernised PDF is poised to continue its proud tradition of public service both at home and on the international stage. The recent seismic developments in terms of the PDF's integration as neutrals into EU and NATO/PfP structures – as explicitly required by the UN – will ensure that Ireland continues to gain military and political traction at international levels commensurate with a nation 'boxing far above its weight'. The political influence and positive perceptions of Ireland internationally generated by such military service should not be underestimated. Any reduction in the numbers of officers contained in any future White Paper on Defence – or any diminution in their status as the core professional group in Ireland's defence establishment - would represent a retrograde step not just for the PDF but for Ireland itself. In addition, any attempt to seek security opt-outs – as a knee jerk political response to fallacious assertions about Ireland's neutral status circulated by the 'No' campaign - in any future referendum on Lisbon would be equally misguided and would undo in one fell stroke all of the dramatic and positive changes of the last decade.

Dr. Tom Clonan (Captain Retired) is the Irish Times Security Analyst. He lectures in the School of Media, DIT.