

July 2012

Mr. John McGuinness  
Chairman  
Committee of Public Accounts  
Leinster House  
Dublin 2



Dear Deputy McGuinness

As you are aware, the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform has responsibility for public service matters, for policy in relation to the statutory powers of Oireachtas Committees and also for policy in relation to matters within the remit of the Committee of Public Accounts (PAC).

The Civil Service is charged with two principal tasks, namely to serve the Government of the day in a policy-advisory capacity and to assist Government in its role under the rules laid down by the Oireachtas. The core values of the Irish civil service, namely honesty, integrity, impartiality, respect for the law, respect for persons, diligence, responsiveness and accountability – are, I believe, still strongly held and enduring. I also believe that staff take pride in being committed to such a set of values and that the vast majority of them take their obligations extremely seriously.

This is not to say that mistakes and errors do not occur. They do unfortunately and when they occur it is only right and proper that they should be investigated. Indeed it is important that such investigations are held in a fully open and transparent manner to maintain public confidence and ensure probity.


Reputation and trust are, you will agree, very important both for individuals and institutions. However, I am sure that you will also agree that reputation and trust are very fragile attributes easily damaged and, once damaged, are extremely hard to repair. They can be damaged, sometimes fatally by a single catastrophic failure but can also be just as fatally undermined by being constantly eroded by continuous unsubstantiated comments. As Head of the Department responsible for public service matters, it is of real concern to me that unsubstantiated allegations of a serious nature against the civil service can appear in the press without any evidence to support them.

It is in that context that I would like to raise a number of concerns we have arising from recent press coverage in the Sunday Independent.

I am concerned by your own recent references to the attitude of the Civil Service to the Public Accounts Committee which I believe to be unjustified. This Department and the wider Civil Service are fully supportive of the role of the Public Accounts Committee and other Oireachtas committees in our legislative and audit processes. Undoubtedly tensions may arise in the probing of particular issues or decisions but that should not detract from a system that works well, the purpose of which is fully accepted by the Civil Service. Indeed, the Government and the Department have been amending the budgetary process to facilitate greater involvement by committees in our multi annual process.

The suggestion too that civil servants have been involved in frustrating a banking inquiry is particularly wide of the mark. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform actively supported Government efforts to widen the powers available to committees in the recent referendum. We have been involved too in the work undertaken by our Minister and the Attorney General in seeking to determine the legal options available to Government following defeat of the inquiries referendum. Ultimately, the nature of any banking inquiry is a matter for the Oireachtas and the Government and the Civil Service will work in accordance with the policy determined therein.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Robert Watt', with a stylized, cursive script.

Robert Watt  
Secretary General  
Department of Public Expenditure & Reform