

DEMOTION FOR THE ARTS SECTOR

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The appointment of Taoiseach Brian Cowen's new Cabinet has been the subject of intense discussion and analysis over the last few days. Everybody has an opinion on the elevation of Mary Coughlan to Tanaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment; the appointment of Brian Lenihan to head the Department of Finance; and the demotion of Mary Hanafin from Education to Social and Family Affairs.

However, little public attention has been paid to one particular move. Martin Cullen's transfer from Social and Family Affairs to Arts, Sport and Tourism, replacing the retiring Minister Seamus Brennan, has been little remarked upon outside of the arts sector and of his Waterford constituency. Yet it is a transfer that is especially worthy of note –not so much a sideways move, but more a shift downwards.

Minister Cullen's move means that his political career now looks strangely like that of Seamus Brennan himself, who like Cullen had served in Transport directly before moving to Social and Family Affairs, and finally to Arts, Sport and Tourism. The reason for Seamus Brennan's departure from Cabinet this week was widely reported, as he had earlier informed Brian Cowen by letter of his wish not to be considered for continued ministerial appointment due to ill health.

However, even before this announcement, Minister Brennan's time in Arts, Sport and Tourism had been marked by a serious lack of engagement with the arts sector. During his tenure, the perception prevailed that no argument was being made at the Cabinet table for any increase in arts funding, nor indeed for arts funding even to be maintained at a sustainable level. This year in particular, the Arts Council was granted a budget well below the amount previously identified by both the Council and the Department as necessary. It was as if Minister Brennan had seen the arts position as a demotion and treated it accordingly.

The question is, why is the Department of Arts seen in such a negative light? Judging by the recent ministerial appointments, it has now become the end of the political road, the last step before departure from Cabinet.

Yet by any objective standards, the job of political decision-making on arts policy should be a greatly sought-after position. It carries immense potential to bring about changes which impact upon all of us. To have responsibility for policy implementation in the fields of visual arts, film, theatre, literature, music – to any objective outsider with even a passing interest in cultural matters, it would seem like a dream job!

Yet every Minister appointed to this role since Michael D. Higgins left it in 1997 has appeared to regard it as a consolation prize, or worse, a poisoned chalice. To use the

Taoiseach's own language, it's not quite 'Angola', but certainly somewhere sub-Saharan.

As Arts Minister between 1993-1997, the consensus is that Michael D. Higgins did a superb job, moulding new initiatives and leaving lasting legacies. The Department had a different title then; he was appointed as Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht. In this role he secured an impressive level of funding for expanding the national cultural infrastructure, bringing about the building of new arts centres and theatre spaces across the country. Among other things, he established the national Irish language television station, now TG4; re-established the Irish Film Board and provided important funding initiatives for the film sector; and repealed section 31 of the Broadcasting Act (which had banned Sinn Fein members from appearing on the airwaves). But above all, he brought a passion and enthusiasm to the job that has been unrivalled since. This was clearly the job that he wanted above all else; and he brought plenty of dynamic ideas, plans and policies which he developed energetically while in office.

By contrast, those who have succeeded him have failed to match his level of engagement and enthusiasm, and have been singularly lacking in new ideas for the department. Sile de Valera was appointed in 1997 with the different and unwieldy title of Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands. Her uneventful term of office was followed by that of John O'Donoghue, now Ceann Comhairle. He was appointed in 2002 to head the newly formed Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism. The act of grouping sport and tourism together with arts in itself at the time betrayed a lack of Government recognition of the importance of arts and culture policy. Indeed, John O'Donoghue's move to the department in 2002 was generally seen as a serious demotion from his previous position as Minister for Justice.

The fact is that since Michael D. Higgins' time as Arts Minister, no member of Cabinet has been a strong advocate for the arts at the Cabinet table, largely because each appointee to the arts position has already been on the way out. The arts sector thus remains the poor relation at the table, its status confirmed by Martin Cullen's appointment this week. The unfortunate truth is that as long as the Department of Arts remains the Cabinet waiting room for retirement, arts funding will remain very low on the list of Government priorities.