

Thanks you for sending the draft of the 2016 National Risk Assessment and for the invitation to comment.

I have attached a copy of an article I wrote and which was published in 2014 which contains the main point I would like to make now and which I have made twice previously.

In all risk assessments there is always consideration of the possibility of the meta-risk of the lack of capacity to respond to all the other risks identified. Others, including Rory O'Donnell from NESC have made this point in response to you previous risk assessments. The risks you identify each year are mainly external risk, but if you include internal risks like shortage of houses, you are still left with the risk that our political and administrative system may not be equipped to handle these risks. And this is patently the case. The biggest catastrophies over the past decade and the current housing and water crises, for example, reveal major shortcomings in our system of governance, for example the short-termism that predominates in our political culture.

These shortcomings persist and pose a real and present danger in themselves. There are deficits in our systems of accountability that have not been resolved (such as the new Accountability Board which lacks the independence that such a Board requires), deficits in technocratic competence in many areas, and major deficits in the rule of law. Underpinning all of these is the political culture and its contamination of the administrative culture.

Each of the risk assessments produced this year and in the past two years have studiously avoided including the internal meta-risks to which I refer.

26/11/2014, Irish Independent, Malaise in our political culture poses the biggest risk of all

In his Introduction to the Draft National Risk Assessment 2014, issued for discussion by his department earlier this year, the Taoiseach set out the rationale for, and urgency, of such an initiative: "One of the priorities for our country and our people is to ensure that we learn from the mistakes of the past We must identify the risks that Ireland faces and therefore ensure appropriate prevention Never again should dissenting voices be silenced when warning of risks up ahead We must work to ensure Ireland's terrible reversals of fortune never recur."

Then, along comes Irish Water.

In the process of setting up the new utility, every mistake of the past was repeated: legislation rammed through the Dail; a deal done with the unions that was reminiscent of the worst days of Social Partnership; guarantees of job security that far exceeded those given on the formation of the HSE; massive in-built excessive cost; golden handshake exits and immediate re-employment; and incompetent handling of the crisis when it arose. Throughout the whole sorry saga, "dissenting voices" were ignored.

Effective risk management systems are now 'de rigueur' in all organisations. They are an obligatory element of corporate governance, so the creation of a national risk management system is imperative. Last month, the final version, National Risk Assessment 2014, was published by setting out dozens of potential risks to Ireland under five headings.

- Geopolitical: terrorist incident EU fragmentation.
- Economic: vulnerable banking systems, loss of competitiveness, multinationals.

- Environmental: food safety, disruption to energy supply.
- Technological: cyber security, nuclear contamination.
- Social cohesion: increased chronic disease, unemployment.

All such risks merit consideration as to their likelihood of occurrence with a view to taking preventative measures. However, if we look at the calamities that actually befell Ireland, the biggest risk of all is missing from the list - namely the weaknesses in our political and administrative system. Unless this underlying risk is addressed then every other risk is heightened.

Among our "terrible reversals of fortune" were the implosion of the banking system and collapse of the State's finances, with grave consequences, including mass emigration and unemployment and widespread personal indebtedness. Other major national failures include seemingly intractable problems in our health system, the culture of impunity regarding political corruption and white collar crime, the lack of supports for children at risk, homelessness and the shameful shortcomings in our mental health services.

What is truly galling is that these "terrible reversals of fortune" did not need to occur. The main reason they were not prevented, or at least minimised, lay in the culture of inertia, incompetence, group think, short termism, deference and complacency of our home-grown system of politics and administration.

The Taoiseach himself has repeatedly cited the venal politics of his predecessors in government as the root cause of these misfortunes. It was specifically in this context that he promised a "political revolution".

The Government is to be commended for a number of reform initiatives as well as a wide range of operational reforms.

However, in all cases of institutional failure commentators invariably add that "there can be no lasting reform without cultural change".

Machiavelli said that having the law is insufficient unless you have the supporting morals.

You can tell that a problem is cultural rather than technical when the same failure is repeated, again and again. The biggest single risk to Ireland lies in the inherited political culture. This malaise, endemic in our political system, infected like a contagion vital institutions of the State and other sectors. Whatever the chances of external shocks, like nuclear accidents, the combination of unprincipled politics and incompetent or over-deferential administration continues to pose a real and present danger, as evidenced by the current disruptive, dangerous fiasco over water.

The risk of unrest and damaging political instability will persist until the root cause of public mistrust is confronted, namely the political mindset that spawned the Irish Water debacle. Otherwise, as night follows day, we are fated to repeat this latest shambles.

Our political culture is not mentioned in the National Risk Assessment 2014. This collective denial is the ultimate risk. Let's hope that dissenting voices will be raised on this crucial matter, especially within the tent, and will not be silenced.
