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8 The constituency role of Dáil deputies

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In Chapter 7 we examined the legislative and scrutinising roles of Dáil deputies. In this chapter we concentrate on a different aspect of the work of TDs, looking at the business on which they spend a lot of their time, namely constituency work. Some people wonder whether constituency work is really part of the duties of a TD at all; after all, the Irish constitution says nothing about it. Yet, judging by the large amount of time it occupies, it seems in practice to be more important in the working life of a TD than narrowly-defined parliamentary duties such as speaking in the Dáil chamber or examining legislation. In most countries, it is taken for granted that parliamentarians will work assiduously to protect and further the interests of their constituents, and that constituency work forms part of an MP's parliamentary duties rather than conflicting with them, but in Ireland there is a body of opinion that sees a constituency role as aberrant and outdated, labels it 'clientelism', or believes that it is taken to excess. We shall ask whether there is anything distinctive about Irish practice in this area, looking at the reasons why TDs do so much constituency work, and then consider the consequences it has for the political system

The nature of constituency work

In all parliaments, members have both a formal, national, parliamentary role and a local, often more informal, constituency role. In the former they are expected to play a part in legislative business and in monitoring government behaviour, as was discussed in the previous chapter. In their local role they keep in touch with the people who elected them, looking after the interests both of their constituencies

generally and of individual constituents. This role has several components (Searing, 1994: 121–60; Norton, 1994: 706–7). First, there is a 'welfare officer' role, in which the deputy sorts out, usually by interceding with the local or central civil service, a problem on behalf of an individual or group. Second, there is the 'local promoter' role, the deputy being expected to advance the interests of the constituency generally by helping to attract industry to the area, avert factory closures, secure public investment, and so on. Third, the deputy has the role of 'local dignitary', and will be invited to, and expected to attend, a variety of functions in the constituency. The first two of these require some elaboration, though it is worth making the point that whereas in Britain Searing concluded from his work in the 1970s that most constituency-oriented MPs consciously choose either the welfare officer role or the local promoter role, in Ireland most TDs feel that they have little choice but to try to fulfil both. Having explored these two roles, we then consider the question of whether TDs' constituency work can be regarded as 'clientelistic', before placing deputies' constituency-related activities in comparative perspective.

The Dáil deputy as welfare officer

Those labelled 'welfare officers' by Searing are those 'whose primary focus falls on individual constituents and their difficulties' (Searing, 1994: 124). This may involve advising constituents about the benefits for which they are eligible; advising them how to get one of these benefits (such as a grant, allowance, pension, or livestock headage payment); taking up with the civil service an apparently harsh decision or a case of delay; and helping, or seeming to help, someone to obtain a local authority house or even a job. Some of these activities allegedly involve pulling strings, for example in smoothing the path for dubious planning applications, so for some observers constituency work has negative associations because it is regarded as using undue influence to give particular people unfair advantages. Whatever it entails, it is very time-consuming. A former TD, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, graphically describes the way in which the welfare officer role imposes on the life of a TD:

> Once you get elected you instantly become public property. You are on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year ... As a TD you become responsible for whatever it is that any one of your 100,000 constituents wants you to be responsible for. They will raise these issues with you when you are out shopping, relaxing in the pub on Sunday night or at any other time they happen to run into you. Alternatively they might decide to, and indeed often do, call to your home to discuss their problems ... the Dáil only really operates from Tuesday to Thursday. But working in the Dáil alone doesn't tend to get you re-elected. So on Friday, Saturday and Monday you will find TDs criss-crossing their constituencies holding clinics, attending meetings and dealing with local problems. If they are based in any of the larger constituencies they will put up more than a thousand miles a week in their cars. Their evenings are spent at a mixed bag of political and public functions (Geoghegan-Quinn, 1998).[1]

TDs do a lot of constituency work. Indeed, they probably spend most of their time doing it; as well as holding clinics, they exchange emails or phone calls with constituents and with officials to follow up cases. TDs surveyed in 2009 estimated that they spent 53 per cent of their time on constituency work, of which 40 per cent was devoted to casework and 24 per cent to local promoter activity, with the rest spent either on what seemed to be publicity for themselves or in asking parliamentary questions (Joint Committee on the Constitution, 2010: 36–7). These days most TDs use public funding to maintain a constituency office staffed by an assistant, meaning that the TD does not have to be personally involved in every case. The main subject matter of the cases they receive are housing, social welfare and health (O'Leary, 2011: 336).

Who contacts TDs, how, and why? Successive Irish National Election Study (INES) surveys have found that, on average, approximately 16 per cent of respondents say that they have contacted a TD over the previous twelve months (see

Table 8.1). There is some variation across the four surveys (conducted in 2002, 2006, 2011 and 2016), but we can identify a few general patterns. Making contact with a TD is a practice that crosses social and geographical boundaries; in most of the surveys social class, education, public/private sector employment and gender have little impact on the likelihood of contacting a TD. In the 2002 and 2016 surveys rural dwellers were more likely to make contact than their urban counterparts, though there was no such pattern in 2006 or 2011. Generally, the youngest and oldest age groups are the least likely to contact a TD. Making such contact is positively correlated with other measures of political activity and engagement. For example, in 2011 of those who reported having followed the election campaign closely 21 per cent had contacted a TD in the previous year, compared with only 3 per cent who had followed it 'not at all closely' (Gallagher and Suiter, 2017: 153). Similarly, those who are most knowledgeable about politics, and those who vote, are more likely to make contact with a TD than those with the opposite characteristics.

TABLE 8.1 ABOUT HERE

Constituents may make contact with TDs by one of a number of routes. These days it is not common for constituents to turn up on the doorstep of a TD's house, as used to happen in past decades, and writing a letter to a TD is also a dying practice. The 2016 INES survey found that email has become the most common method of making contact: 36 per cent of respondents had made contact this way, with 31 per cent doing so by phone and 24 per cent at a clinic (Farrell *et al*., 2017). Email is used especially by middle-class respondents, by those with a university education and by younger respondents, while those living in local authority accommodation are particularly likely to make contact by attending a TD's clinic. Contact is made most frequently about a personal matter (58 per cent in 2011, 38 per cent in 2016), with community matters in second place and matters of national policy the least likely to be raised (Farrell *et al*., 2017). Middle class respondents are most likely to be making contact about a community issue, and working-class respondents, especially those living in local authority accommodation, about a personal matter.

Evidently, then, there is a lot of contact between TDs and constituents, and TDs devote a great deal of time to constituency work. Does all this activity serve any useful purpose – do people benefit from asking TDs for assistance? Early studies came to very different conclusions. The Dutch anthropologist Mart Bax, whose conclusions were drawn from observations in County Cork, maintained that TDs have considerable power; they could install an associate in a position of power locally and use him or her thereafter. He painted a picture of corruption, string-pulling and bribery (for example, Bax, 1976: 49, 64).[2] In contrast, the American political scientist Paul Sacks, who conducted research in County Donegal, concluded that politicians could achieve very little. They nonetheless managed to create and retain bodies of support by dispensing what he called 'imaginary patronage' – that is, they convinced people that they had achieved something for them even though in reality they had not (Sacks, 1976: 7–8). Nearly all the constituency work TDs do was carried out, he implied, solely to create the impression that the TD was making an effort. Certainly, some of it might be of this nature: many requests concern cases where the constituent will get the benefit anyway without anyone's help (such as an old age pension) or will not get it as he or she is simply not eligible. However, it might seem implausible that TDs can build up, and preserve for many years, a reputation as hard-working and effective constituency politicians simply by dispensing imaginary patronage, unless their constituents are exceptionally gullible.

Moreover, pace Bax, there is not much evidence to back up claims of widespread 'string-pulling'. Of course, it is possible that there is more such activity than meets the public eye. When a former minister, Michael Lowry, fell from grace (at national level) in 1997, with a tribunal finding that he had been receiving substantial payments on which he had avoided tax (Murphy, 2016: 82–3), reporters found considerable local support for him from people who saw him as helpful in various though not precisely specified ways. In the words of one: 'He will help secure finances for certain things. He will help you if you are buying land or setting up your own business. Whatever it is, you can go to Michael, he will be there and if he can he will

sort it out'. One supporter insisted that Lowry did not get people things to which they were not entitled; he was simply 'an absolute master at cutting through red tape' (quotes from Ingle, 1997). Whatever form his assistance took, it was very well received by his constituents; standing as an independent, Lowry headed the poll at each election in the period 1997–2016. Another Tipperary TD, Noel Davern, who had first been elected in 1969, said many years later that some of the improper favours that TDs are alleged to be able to secure may have been possible in the past but that TDs were now much more constrained by a number of factors and 'you wouldn't even think of doing that now' (quoted in Hannon, 2004: 56). These days, the likelihood of discovery is greater, and the public mood towards such behaviour is less tolerant. TDs themselves when interviewed in 2009 downplayed their ability to get decisions overturned, though significant minorities believed that they could do this, and felt that for the most part their intervention simply got a case speeded up (O'Leary, 2011: 338–9).

Assistance from TDs may result from their control of or access to private rather than state resources. The two Healy-Rae brothers, Danny and Michael, were both elected as independent TDs in the Kerry constituency in 2016, and assistance from another member of the clan was cited by one voter as the reason for supporting them: 'I needed a track machine to clear a drain and Johnny had it down to me with a driver in two days, all free' (Nolan, 2016).

Overall, politicians' scope for pulling strings is not great, and is certainly less than it once was. The principle of appointment in the civil service on merit rather than through string-pulling was established early on, with the creation in the 1920s of the Civil Service Commission and the Local Appointments Commission. Over the years, the writs of these bodies have been progressively extended. Politicians cannot secure jobs for people, and voters do not expect them to do that.

In other words, it is very unlikely that much of the constituency work of TDs involves pulling strings on behalf of constituents, if only because ordinary TDs do not have many strings to pull. It is true that government ministers have the power to make

decisions that will benefit or damage individuals, and there have been allegations and tribunal decisions that string-pulling and corruption have surfaced at this level (Byrne, 2012). Moreover, at local level, scope for enrichment exists because rezoning of land may result in a substantial financial gain for the landowner, and charges of corruption in this area have led to tribunals of inquiry and to criminal prosecutions (Byrne 2012: 169–71). Even so, all the evidence is that the bulk of the constituency work conducted by ordinary backbench TDs is more mundane and less ethically questionable than this. A consensus has emerged that TDs can be helpful to constituents, but not by getting them things to which they are not entitled. Instead, the value of contacting a TD lies in the fact that this can enable people to find out about the existence of – and/or how to obtain – benefits, grants or rights of which they would otherwise have been unaware, or would have found difficult to secure without assistance.

This was the conclusion of research conducted in Dublin in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It found that the claim of politicians 'to power or influence rested on their ability to monopolise and then market their specialist knowledge of state resources and their access to bureaucrats who allocated such resources' (Komito, 1984: 174). Politicians could tell people what they were eligible for and how to secure it; this involved little work for the politician but saved constituents, many of whom are 'bureaucratically illiterate', a lot of work. In addition, a TD's intervention sometimes forced a case to be reviewed, a decision to be speeded up or a service to be provided (Komito, 1984: 182–3).

Kelly found much the same from her analysis of the caseload of Michael D. Higgins, then a Galway West TD (and subsequently President of Ireland). Despite the picture presented by O'Toole and Dooney (2009: 341–2), according to which representations from politicians rarely have any effect, Kelly (1987: 145) found that in many instances the TD was able to secure a benefit for people after they had initially been turned down by the civil service, and he also got cases speeded up. He achieved this not by pulling strings but because of his expertise: his knowledge of

how best to present the case and of what sort of supporting documentation was needed. Some people had been corresponding with the wrong department, while others had omitted steps such as quoting their social welfare number or obtaining a doctor's certificate to back up their case. The same conclusion, that politicians can make a difference, either because they know the rules better than the constituent, or because they know more about the constituent's circumstances than a bureaucrat would glean from the standard application form, was reached by Hourigan (2015: 102–3). Through experience TDs probably can be of genuine assistance: as one TD put it, 'there is hardly a Deputy in this House who is not at least as conversant with the supplementary welfare allowance scheme as are the community welfare officers' (Proinsias De Rossa, *Dáil Debates* 428: 834, 25 March 1993).

The point that some people really do benefit from contacting a TD was put colourfully in 1997 by a renowned exponent of constituency work, P. J. Sheehan, a Fine Gael TD for Cork South-West between 1981 and 2011. During his successful re-election campaign, he outlined his analysis and posed the rhetorical question:

> In rural Ireland, many don't have the confidence, or the knowledge about where to go or how to fight for their rights ... as long as we have the present system and bureaucracy exists, there will be a need for a helping hand and a friendly ear. If this service isn't needed, why are my clinics from the Head of Kinsale to the Dursey Sound overflowing with people every weekend?[3] (*Southern Star,* 31 May 1997).

As in Canada, constituents may be relieved to 'reach someone real' after their experience of speaking with a different bureaucrat each time they call and having to give their file number every time (Peter Macleod, quoted in Franks, 2007: 34).

While the articulate and resourceful members of the commentariat may be well able to tackle their own problems, or call on a professional acquaintance for advice, or do not have such problems in the first place, and can thus afford to look down

disdainfully at what they term ‘clientelism’, there are others for whom TDs perform an invaluable role. As a former minister puts it, ‘For many people unfamiliar with the intricacies of a state bureaucracy, their deputy is their only accessible and sympathetic intermediary’ (Quinn, 2005: 409). In a Seanad debate in 2007, responding to suggestions from a university senator that TDs should prioritise their legislative role, the former Fianna Fáil minister Mary O’Rourke said ‘Let Senator Norris try to work through the bureaucracy of a county council without the assistance of someone who knows what approach to take’ (*Seanad Debates* 185: 1664, 1 February 2007). Political commentator Noel Whelan observes that even though a lot of information is now available online and state bureaucracy is more user-friendly than it was in the past, ‘many people still choose or need someone they know to tackle this bureaucracy with them’ (Whelan, 2015). A Dublin deputy, Róisín Shortall, then of the Labour party, related:

> I represent an area with a very high level of unemployment, poverty, housing problems, and people who spend their lives in queues, trying to sort out social welfare issues. I get up to 250 letters a week, and the follow-up on all these takes time. I wish it were not so. I wish people were sufficiently empowered to sort out their own problems. I wish they could go to their citizens’ advice bureau and get the help they need. But this doesn’t happen (*Irish Times* 13 June 1995: 11).

So researchers have not found evidence of TDs interfering on a major scale with the equitable operation of the political or administrative system but, equally, it is not true that TDs cannot achieve anything and that those who attend their clinics are suffering from a collective delusion. The picture to which most research points is that constituency work mainly involves rather routine activity, attending many clinics and local meetings, writing letters, helping people to sort out their social welfare problems and so on, rather than anything more corrupt or devious. The TD’s welfare officer role, in fact, resembles that of a lawyer, who operates not by bribing the judge or jury

but by ensuring that the case is presented better than the ordinary citizen would be able to present it.

The Dáil deputy as local promoter

The local promoter role is concerned primarily with making representations about 'the constituency's collective needs, which may be economic, environmental, or social' (Searing, 1994: 130). It may involve activity on behalf of a community, town, or residents' association, for example to persuade central or local government to improve water or sewerage services, street lighting, or roads ('fixing potholes' has become a standard summary of this activity for those who take a negative view of TDs' focus on constituency work). As when acting in the welfare officer role, this might involve the TD in contacting civil servants to try to get a decision reversed or speeded up, or in putting down a parliamentary question. Another aspect of the local promoter role is that a TD is expected to fight to increase the constituency's share of whatever cakes exist: that is, to attract new industries to the area, to prevent existing industries closing, to get state backing for local projects, and generally to ensure that the constituency does well out of the disbursement of government resources.

Voters in many constituencies seem to feel that their area is hard done by, so at elections TDs and other candidates invariably stress their determination to rectify matters. A recurrent theme in the campaigns of non-incumbents is that the sitting TDs have failed to 'deliver' for the constituency (or a part of it), which has been neglected for many years, and most candidates imply that the amount of resources flowing to a constituency is partly a function of the pressure exerted by its TDs. For example, after winning a by-election in Longford–Westmeath in 2014, Gabrielle McFadden stated:

> The promise that I made to the people of Longford–Westmeath during the campaign was that I would fight very hard and shout very loud for Longford–Westmeath, and I will do that ... I think a lot of the recovery is happening in the Dublin area and I want some of that obviously for Longford–Westmeath,

> so I will be there every step of the way fighting to make sure that if there's money coming out of government for anything, that Longford–Westmeath will get it, that if there's a possibility of a company to come to this country, to invest in this country, I will be fighting for it to come to Longford or Westmeath, that's my way ... I mean it's he who shouts loudest and all of that, you know? (RTÉ Radio 1, Marion Finucane Show, 25 May 2014).

Essentially the same sentiments are expressed by many other candidates around the country at every election.

Given his or her very limited power, though, there is not a great deal that the ordinary TD can achieve – unless they happen to be an independent TD holding the balance of power (Weeks 2017: chapter 7). One member of the 31st Dáil, explaining his decision to retire, explained that he had been able to achieve more as a councillor, such as 'parks, swimming pools and so on' than he had as a TD (Michael Conaghan, quoted in Minihan, 2015). Notwithstanding that, a significant minority of voters believe that TDs can have an impact on the geographical distribution of expenditure: 24 per cent in 2002 of respondents to the INES (and 29 per cent in 2007) said that in their view local TDs were most responsible for 'any improvements in the economic situation around here over the last five years', only slightly behind the percentage attributing this to government policies. On the whole, though, TDs can do little except to lobby hard those, primarily ministers, who make the important decisions. If a TD becomes a minister, constituents' expectations will rise accordingly, as there is a widespread belief that a minister who is sufficiently hard-working and adroit can 'deliver' in a big way for the constituency. In the 2007 INES, 75 per cent of respondents agreed that 'a constituency represented by a cabinet minister will have more money spent in it by the government', and research concludes that ministers can exercise some power, if only at the margins, as to where public money is spent (Manton, 2016; Suiter and O'Malley, 2014a, b). Examples abound of ministers who

are said to have secured largesse – 'pork', in American terminology – for their constituency, or at least for their own base within it (see Box 8.1).

BOX 8.1 ABOUT HERE

In this way, voters have an incentive, when choosing their TDs, to elect candidates of perceived ministerial ability. As we saw in Chapter 4, intra-party competition for electoral support is inherent in the Irish electoral system, and supporters of the largest parties usually have a choice of candidates. Despite suggestions that voters' desire for good constituency representation might lead them to choose active locally-oriented representatives at the expense of people of national ability, and hence lower the calibre of parliamentarians (part of the argument of Carty, 1981: 137), in fact voters making their choices purely on the basis of local considerations have a strong incentive to support candidates of ministerial ability, because a minister can deliver the goods locally on a much grander scale than a permanent backbencher. Ironically, then, a desire for good local representation can lead to the election of nationally-oriented politicians.

Constituency work and clientelism

Some people use the term 'clientelist politics' to describe politics in Ireland; journalists and politicians alike are prone to speak, usually disapprovingly, of 'our clientelist system'. The picture painted by Bax and Sacks, as we have outlined, is one of politicians doing favours (real according to Bax, imaginary according to Sacks) for people and in return being rewarded by a vote at the next election. The suggestion is that politicians gradually build up a sizeable and fairly stable 'clientele' of people who are under some obligation to them; the politicians are able to 'call in the debts' at election time. Most voters, it is implied, are part of some politician's clientele.

However, the word 'clientele' would not be very apposite to describe those who give a first preference vote to a particular Dáil candidate. TDs simply do not possess 'clienteles'. Most people, as we saw earlier (Table 8.1), do not contact TDs at all. Moreover, even those who are helped by a TD cannot be taken for granted. For one

thing, some of them 'do the rounds' of the clinics, hoping to improve their chances by getting several TDs to chase up their case; the 2006 INES found that around a third of those who had contacted a TD had contacted more than one TD (Gallagher and Suiter, 2017: 155). For another, even if a TD does something for a constituent, the secrecy of the ballot means that he or she has no way of knowing whether the favour is returned at the ballot box. Many of the key characteristics of clientelism, such as the solidarity binding 'clients' and 'patrons', are simply not present in Irish electoral politics (Farrell, 1985: 241; Collins and O'Shea, 2003: 88–90).

Clientelism is conventionally defined in the academic literature as entailing much more than mere routine constituency work. As it has been expressed, 'clientelistic accountability represents a transaction, the direct exchange of a citizen's vote in return for direct payments or continuing access to employment, goods and services' (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007: 2). The kind of activities regarded as characterising clientelism, such as the distribution of public housing, special welfare benefits for supporters, public sector jobs, or the issuing of a birth certificate or a disability pension (Kitschelt, 2000: 849; Piattoni, 2001: 6), are simply not in the gift of TDs. In Ireland, constituents are typically seeking access to, or simply information about, universal benefits rather than attempting to secure selective benefits that are not available to non-members of a politician's 'clientele'. An essential feature of a genuinely clientelistic system is that elected politicians in effect control the hiring, firing and advancement of career officials (Piattoni, 2001: 7). Although Bax, quoted earlier, painted a picture according to which this was the case in County Cork in the late 1960s, the Civil Service and Local Appointments Commissions to which we referred on p. 000 above mean that this is simply not the case in Ireland.

Thus, an earlier study concluded that 'politicians believed that they were inevitably dependent on the votes of anonymous constituents with whom they could have no direct links' (Komito, 1984: 181). Far from resting comfortably atop pyramids of loyal supporters, they come across as 'professional paranoids', permanently insecure, always busy at constituency work but never sure that any of it

will pay electoral dividends. They promote a high community profile, advertise clinics, turn up at residents' association meetings and so on, not to build up a clientele – which is impossible – but simply to earn a reputation as hard-working people. They hope that even people who never actually need their services are impressed and will conclude that the TD will be there if they ever need him or her.

This being so, the word 'clientelism' is simply not appropriate to describe what TDs do in their role as constituency representatives. It is more realistic to see TDs as being engaged in 'brokerage', a distinct concept. A broker deals in access to those who control resources rather than directly in the resources themselves; there might be situations in which a person wants something but is unable or unwilling to obtain it direct from the actor who has it, in which case the services of a broker may be useful. Once the service has been provided, the brokerage relationship ends. Clientelism, in contrast, implies a more intense, more permanent relationship. It involves 'clients', people who are in some way tied in to the person who does things for them, whereas 'brokerage' implies a relationship that is not institutionalised. 'To describe a political system as clientelistic is to imply persistent and diffuse relations of exchange in a closed system where all participants are either leaders or followers, and never simply uninvolved' (Komito, 1984: 176). To say that Irish politics is characterised by brokerage would imply that there are many people who do not have any dealings with TDs, and that even the people who do use TDs as brokers are not under any direct obligation to them as a result. Although the loosely-used term 'clientelism' has caught on in some circles as a way of describing constituency work, most reliable research suggests that brokerage rather than clientelism, as defined above, is the appropriate term to characterise TDs' constituency activities.

The term 'clientelism' may be used by some commentators partly because of its pejorative and nefarious connotations; it has overtones of manipulation and string-pulling, of a mode of behaviour that some feel Ireland should be moving away from, in contrast to the more neutral 'brokerage'. Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984: 18) observe that the tendency develops in many societies to perceive less formalised

relations of this kind as 'slightly subversive to the institutionalised order, to fully institutionalised relationships or to membership of collectivities'. As we shall see later, constituency work in Ireland has been criticised on precisely these grounds.

Constituency work in comparative perspective

Before going on to examine the reasons why TDs engage in so much constituency work, we will look briefly at patterns in other countries. This should dispel any illusion that the constituency role of Irish parliamentarians is somehow unusual or that a heavy constituency focus is an example of Irish exceptionalism (Gallagher and Suiter, 2017: 145–8). 'Grievance chasing' is part of the role of the parliamentarian virtually everywhere. In the USA, an early study of the way public representatives spent their time noted: 'Providing constituent services and doing case work constitute for many representatives more significant aspects of their representational role than does legislative work like bill-drafting or attending committee hearings' (Eulau and Karps, 1977: 243–4). Michael Mezey notes that running errands for individual constituents and lobbying for funds for one's constituency are common to legislators around the world, and 'are in many ways the core of what we consider to be "representative democracy" ' (Mezey, 2008: xi). More broadly, relationships (which may or may not be of the patron–client form) based on personal linkages tend to exist in all types of society – modern or traditional, western or eastern, developed or pre-modern (Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1984).

A comparison in the 1990s between TDs and members of the UK House of Commons found that the latter did less constituency work than the TDs, but not very much less; for example, they spent 47 per cent of their time on constituency work compared with 58 per cent for TDs (Wood and Young, 1997: 221). Most TDs believed that their re-election prospects would be damaged if they cut back on their constituency work, but most MPs did not believe this. Why, then, do MPs in Britain do so much constituency work? The main factor, another study concludes, is the

psychological satisfaction that comes from doing it, 'combined with a general sense that casework is an important public duty of representatives' (Norris, 1997: 47). Research into the behaviour of MPs in the UK finds a continuing rise both in constituents' demand for local service from their MP and in constituency orientations among MPs (Campbell and Lovenduski, 2015: 696–7).

The same conclusion was reached by a study of Canadian MPs, which found that constituency work takes up more of their time than any other activity (Franks, 2007: 32). Parliament adjourns every fourth or fifth week to enable MPs to spend more time in their constituencies. As in Britain, MPs do this not primarily for electoral motives – in fact, those who regard it as unimportant to their re-election prospects actually do more of it than those who regard it as electorally important – but because it is seen as part of the job and as a 'satisfying' activity (Franks, 2007: 30). Surveys conducted in 2004 in the recently-established legislatures in Scotland and Wales found that virtually all members of these bodies considered helping to solve constituents' problems as very important, 'exceeding the perceived importance of all the other roles open to members' (Bradbury and Mitchell, 2007: 126). A cross-national survey of backbench MPs in five countries found that TDs in Ireland expressed a lower degree of constituency focus than their counterparts in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (Heitshuisen et al, 2005: 39). Given the suggestion that the intra-party competition generated by PR-STV is the cause of TDs' constituency workload in Ireland (see pp. 000–00 below), it is worth making the point that none of the other countries mentioned in this section employs an electoral system under which candidates of a party are competing for votes against running mates.

Given this pattern, it would be very surprising if Irish members of parliament did *not* have heavy constituency workloads. Defending and promoting the interests of one's constituents to the best of one's abilities is 'part of the job' for a member of parliament, and it is hard to imagine a job specification for TDs that does not include this role. Collins and O'Shea (2003: 106) suggest that the contrary view may derive partly from a 'deeply-held' bureaucratic idea that politicians, certainly ministers,

should confine themselves to broad issues of policy and that any involvement in administration is thus inappropriate interference. The constituency role is recognised by law, even if not in the constitution, in that some of the payments and facilities made available to TDs are expressly for the purpose of carrying out their constituency work (O'Halpin, 2002: 113). Perhaps, indeed, what requires explaining is not why TDs do a lot of constituency work but, rather, why anyone should think it strange that they do. However, this question, interesting as it is, falls outside the scope of the present chapter.

Causes of constituency work

Even though members of parliament almost everywhere have a heavy constituency load, the perception of Irish politics as 'clientelist' and somehow anomalous seems to be so widespread that it is worth trying to explain the high volume of casework descending on TDs. Four factors in particular are frequently mentioned: political cultural attitudes to the state, the small scale of society, the electoral system, and the nature of the Irish administrative system. The potential impact of the ever-wider use of new technology is also discussed.

Political culture

Two aspects of Irish political culture are relevant to the constituency role of TDs. First, past attitudes to the state may still have a bearing on current attitudes. Second, the nature of elite political culture means that TDs regard serving their constituents as one of their most important roles.

First, historical factors may have led to some alienation from the state. In all peasant societies, the capital city and the machinery of central government tend to be looked on with some suspicion, and in Ireland this was reinforced by the non-indigenous nature of the ruling elite. Chubb (1992: 210) suggests that brokerage is

> deeply rooted in Irish experience. For generations, Irish people saw that to get the benefits that public authorities bestow, the help of a man with connections and influence was necessary. All that democracy has meant is that such a person has been laid on officially, as it were, and is now no longer a master but a servant.

Prior to Irish independence, MPs of the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster were noted for their exceptionally strong focus on constituency matters (McConnel, 2013: 36). The argument, then, is that the political culture of the nineteenth century and before, when central government was for obvious reasons perceived as alien, remote and best approached via an intermediary, has carried on into the post-independence state. Former Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald once commented that Dublin 'is still widely perceived in rural Ireland as if it were even today a centre of alien colonial rule' (FitzGerald, 1991: 364). Given that so many other aspects of pre-independence political culture have a bearing on contemporary politics (see Chapter 2), this is perfectly plausible, and indeed surveys have testified to people's belief that a TD is the best person to approach if one wants to be sure of getting one's entitlements (Farrell, 1985: 243; Komito, 1992).

This cultural explanation would become dubious, however, if linked too closely with the notion of a 'dying peasant culture' or with a suggestion that people's tendency to approach their TDs springs from an atavistic misconception of the way in which officialdom works. After all, the volume of brokerage seems to be increasing rather than decreasing as urbanisation and the decline of agriculture proceed. Political culture and the legacy of the past are part of the explanation, but we need to look also for causes in present-day Ireland: 'rather than an outmoded style of behaviour, brokerage is an effective solution to a particular set of problems' (Komito, 1984: 191). Thus there is no reason to expect brokerage work to go away as 'modernisation' continues.

More broadly, successive INES datasets show how deeply rooted in Irish political culture is the expectation that TDs will give high priority to the constituency representation role. When given the proposition 'The assumption that TDs should provide a local service is a strength of the Irish political system', 52 per cent in 2011 and 62 per cent in 2016 agreed. Respondents in 2011 felt, in fact, that at present TDs spend too little time on constituency work and too much time on national issues – though before conclusions are drawn about a supposedly exceptionally locally-oriented Irish political culture, it is worth noting that Irish respondents wanted their parliamentary representatives to divide their time equally between local and national matters, whereas British voters would prefer theirs to devote 60 per cent of their time to constituency work and only 40 per cent to national matters (Gallagher and Suiter, 2017: 160–1). Attitudes to the role of the TD are not uniform across society. Generally, the better-off, those with more education, those who regard national and international events as more interesting than local ones, and readers of the *Irish Times*, are the least enthused by TDs' local role, with those with opposite characteristics being the most enthusiastic (Gallagher and Suiter, 2017: 161–2; Farrell *et al*., 2017). The cynical view of one commentator is that, even if TDs do sometimes apply pressure to have a constituent given preferential treatment, this is primarily a reflection of an ambivalence within the wider political culture: when it 'works' for someone he or she regards the TD as a good constituency worker, but 'when it works for someone else, it's called cronyism' (Sheridan, 2014).

Second, elite political culture leads TDs to regard local and constituency representation as an integral part of their job rather than as something that 'takes them away from their proper role'. TDs interviewed at the start of the century reported that their constituency, rather than the nation as a whole or a specific sectional group, was their main representational focus (O'Sullivan, 2002: 206–7). When TDs were asked what they had hoped to achieve when they entered politics, a plurality replied 'promote the interests of the local area' (O'Sullivan, 2002: 209). Some TDs had drifted away from this aim and had come to prioritise national issues, while others,

finding their initial national-level goals to be unachievable, acquired a stronger local focus over time (O'Sullivan, 2002: 211–12). TDs did not, though, see the local role as excluding a nationally-oriented one, for more of them identified 'legislating and influencing policy' as being among the most important duties and responsibilities of a TD than identified 'represent the constituency' (O'Sullivan, 2002: 237). When surveyed in 2009, TDs tended to rate the constituency aspects of their role as more important than activity related to legislation (Joint Committee on the Constitution, 2010: 38). First-time TDs interviewed three years later found constituency work to be 'satisfying and important' while being hugely time-consuming (Murphy, 2013: 10). In other words, TDs accept that active constituency representation comes with the job, though they do not see this as being incompatible with a nationally-focused role.

Small size of society

In all societies, informal networks of trust exist within and alongside formal structures. Such networks may be particularly significant in small societies where many people have some kind of direct or indirect access to decision makers that bypasses the formal structure. The Republic of Ireland is clearly, in relative terms, a small society, with only 4.8 million people, and this has an impact on people's perceptions of their deputies' role. At the 2016 election, for example, there was one deputy for every 20,918 electors and for every 13,499 valid votes. Very few other countries have as high a ratio of deputies to voters.

One might expect that the fewer people each member of parliament represents, the lower his or her constituency workload will be. Yet, at the same time, the fewer people each member represents, the more contact voters are likely to expect with him or her. In the USA, it has been found that the smaller the number of people represented by each Senator, the more those people are likely to define the Senator's role in pork-barrel terms and the more contact they are likely to have with their Senators (Hibbing and Alford, 1990). With such a small number of voters to represent, it is hardly surprising that deputies find themselves asked to play the role of

'mediator-advocate vis-à-vis the local and national administrative bureaucracies', as Farrell (1985: 242) puts it. The 2002 INES found that 69 per cent of voters had spoken personally to the candidate to whom they gave their first preference vote (Marsh *et al*., 2008: 256).

A reinforcing factor in Ireland is the high degree of centralisation of decision making, nearly all of which takes place in Dublin. Local government is weak – indeed, the lowest tier, town councils, was abolished in 2014 – with very few powers, and there are no intermediate (regional or provincial) tiers of government. The casework loads of Belgium's national MPs dropped dramatically once federalism was introduced in the mid-1990s (De Winter, 2002: 100). The upshot of the absence of significant sub-national government in Ireland is that national parliamentary representatives get requests for assistance with what in many other countries would be purely local matters. This is reinforced by the fact that the great majority of TDs (82 per cent of those elected in 2016, as noted on p. 000 above) come to the Dáil via local government, where they may be socialised into a casework-oriented role. Indeed, according to the 2002 election survey, TDs are contacted much more than councillors; only 11 per cent of voters had contacted a councillor in the previous five years (and a mere 2 per cent had contacted a senator), compared with 21 per cent for TDs. The outlawing in June 2004 of the 'dual mandate' (whereby individuals were able to be simultaneously TDs and members of a county or city council) was intended in part to reduce TDs' interest and involvement in local matters. However, in practice the assiduity with which TDs keep an eye on the grass roots does not seem to have abated since then, and many have close relatives or associates sitting on local councils to ensure that they are kept fully informed about local developments by someone who, they hope, will not try to oust them.

The electoral system

Calling for a number of political reforms, Elaine Byrne asked: 'Should we introduce a new electoral system? One which produces national parliamentarians instead of

provincial ombudsmen?' (Byrne, 2008). This neatly encapsulates a view expressed by a number of critics of PR-STV to the effect that, first, TDs spend too much time on activities they should not be spending their time on; second, TDs do not spend enough time on what they should be doing; and third, the electoral system is the cause of this state of affairs (for other examples see Hourigan, 2015: 100–1; O'Leary, 2014; O'Toole, 2011: 40–7, 73–80). Each of these assumptions is very much open to question (as was argued many years ago by one of the authors – see Gallagher, 1987).

The reason why the electoral system is sometimes suggested as a cause of brokerage is that, as we saw in Chapter 4, PR-STV puts candidates of the same party in competition with each other and thereby compels them to establish an edge over their so-called running mates. Running mates are a definite danger. Between 1922 and 1997, 34 per cent of all TDs who suffered defeat at an election, and 56 per cent of defeated Fianna Fáil TDs, lost their seat not to a rival party's candidate but to one of their running mates (Gallagher, 2000: 97). Among TDs surveyed in 2009, the more running mates a TD had at the last election, the higher the proportion of their time they spent on constituency work (Joint Committee on the Constitution, 2010: 42). Moreover, as we saw in Chapter 7, backbench deputies cannot easily make their mark as outstanding parliamentarians, so they cannot feasibly try to fight internal party battles on that terrain. Thus, once the demand for brokerage activity arises, TDs feel they have to respond to it. When surveyed by Wood and Young (1997: 221), 60 per cent of recently-elected TDs said they felt they could lose their seat if they reduced their constituency work.

TDs are probably right to believe that their electoral fortunes are affected by their reputation as constituency workers. Surveys have consistently shown that voters, when asked to rank a number of factors as determinants of their votes, attach more importance to choosing a TD who will look after the local needs of the constituency than to anything else (Farrell *et al.*, 2017). Even if some of those who say they want a TD who will look after the constituency are in fact expressing a choice *within* party rather than a choice regardless of party, it is clear that voters attach importance to this

role. Party members, too, certainly in Fine Gael, regard the local brokerage role as more important than the national parliamentary one (Gallagher and Marsh, 2002: 131–2). Newly-elected TDs, as part of their informal socialisation process in the Dáil, learn the conventional wisdom among politicians that ignoring constituency work in order to concentrate on delivering eloquent speeches in the chamber would be a recipe for electoral suicide (Murphy, 2013: 9).

The electoral system gives TDs a strong incentive to respond with alacrity to the demand that they do constituency work, but it does not really explain where this demand comes from in the first place. Even accepting that TDs eagerly advertise their availability and actively seek problems to solve, and may thereby generate more constituency work than would arise otherwise, this still leaves a lot that arises from other causes.

Emphasis on the electoral system as a significant cause of the constituency role of TDs implies that under a different electoral system the volume of constituency work might diminish significantly. This is very doubtful; as we saw on pp. 000–00 above, members of parliament in countries with a range of completely different electoral systems undertake a lot of constituency work. Even if Ireland moved to a closed-list PR system, where the voters simply had to accept the candidates selected by the party organisation without being able to choose between them, MPs might still do a lot of constituency work, as Belgian MPs did under what was in effect a closed list system in the 1990s. They did this in order to discharge what was felt to be a duty, together with the gratification that comes from achieving something tangible for a constituent, as well as establishing one's position as a VIP in the constituency, in contrast with the anonymity of life as a backbencher. In addition, the candidate selectors, i.e. the local party members, when deciding how to order the candidates on the party list, favoured candidates who were active in dealing with casework, and just as in Israel, which also uses closed-list PR, deputies must be very active at local level in order to build up support among the candidate selectors even though the voters cannot express a preference for them (De Winter, 1997). Müller, reviewing evidence from a number of

countries, concludes that the impact of electoral systems should not be over-estimated: 'candidate-centred systems produce incentives for individual behavior, but it seems it depends on the circumstances how strong these effects are and what kind of behavior they cause' (Müller, 2007: 273). The evidence does not support a belief that a new electoral system would reduce, let alone remove, the burden of constituency work.

Administrative structures

The argument here is essentially that some citizens need brokers to obtain their entitlements. This is the conclusion of Roche and Komito and implicitly of others, such as Valerie Kelly, as well as TDs such as Róisín Shortall and P. J. Sheehan whom we quoted earlier. As Roche (1982: 103), who later became a TD himself, puts it: 'Irish complaint behaviour is a manifestation of a breakdown at the interface level between Ireland's public institutions and the Irish public'. In other words, some people turn to TDs to help them due to the frustration that results from their own direct dealings with the state apparatus.

This arises because of the nature of the machinery with which citizens come into contact. All bureaucracies tend to develop certain characteristics, such as inflexibility, rigid adherence to the rules and perhaps impatience with people who do not fully understand these rules. In Ireland, there is very little occupational mobility between the public service and the wider economy. There may be a bureaucratic tendency to send out standard replies that do not address a specific query, not to explain fully what someone is entitled to or why some application has been turned down – and inevitably there will be cases of delay. One TD in an interview stated that 'a lot of the work you get is a matter of red tape and ... really we shouldn't be dealing with it – if officials at various levels were more consumer friendly ... we wouldn't have half the workload we have' (O'Sullivan, 2002: 291). In 1962 a senator characterised the constituency work of TDs as 'going about persecuting civil servants', a phrase that was later used as the title of a very influential article (Chubb, 1963) and still

resonates. In 2007 the leader of the Seanad, Mary O'Rourke, said 'One paper suggested our job is to persecute civil servants. I agree. We need to persecute them, to make many approaches and to do much banging on doors' (*Seanad Debates* 185: 1665, 1 February 2007).

All of this leaves many people wanting assistance from someone willing to help them, and contacting a TD often seems the most attractive option. The main alternative is to seek assistance from a Citizens Information Centre (CIC). There are 112 such centres around the country; they operate under the auspices of the state-funded Citizens Information Board and are run largely by volunteers, of whom there were almost 1,100 in 2015 (Citizens Information Board, 2016: 48). CICs not only give information on social welfare entitlements (social welfare accounts for about half of the questions they receive) but, where appropriate, also take up cases with the relevant office or department; when queries were analysed in the late 1990s it was found that the great majority of cases involved only imparting information (Browne, 1999: 34). In 2015 CICs dealt with almost a million direct queries, with another 153,000 queries arriving by phone, though scarcely any were sent by email (Citizens Information Board, 2016: 9, 54). This is clear evidence of public demand for assistance in dealing with the state bureaucracy. However, the restricted opening hours of CICs, and, perhaps, the limited ability of their volunteers to persuade public officials to reverse a decision, mean that these centres and services clearly do not meet the full demand.

A valuable channel for obtaining rectification of grievances is the office of the Ombudsman, which was established in January 1984 (see Chapter 10, and Morgan, 2012: 239–73, for the powers and operation of the office). However, many cases coming to TDs result from a lack of information as to how best to utilise the administrative system (or just disgruntlement with a decision) and do not involve possible maladministration; as John Whyte (1966: 16) put it half a century ago, they are problems on 'a humbler scale' than would warrant the attention of the Ombudsman. In the words of the National Social Service Board, 'the problem for

most people in writing to the various Departments seems to be (i) not knowing exactly which section to address their letter to and (ii) the standard letter of reply may not deal satisfactorily with their enquiry' (NSSB, *Annual Report 1991*: 7). Consequently, over the period 2011–15 the office of the Ombudsman received on average 3,476 valid cases a year, plus a further 1,411 that fell outside its jurisdiction (all figures calculated from the *Annual Reports* of the Ombudsman), whereas TDs collectively are contacted by around half a million people per year (Gallagher and Suiter, 2017: 155). When the Ombudsman's 1996 annual report was debated in the Dáil, TDs commented tartly that the average TD deals with about the same number of cases per year as the Ombudsman does. One added that when the Ombudsman solves someone's problem, his or her work is praised as vindicating the rights of the ordinary citizen, yet when TDs do the same their activities are frowned upon and dismissed as 'an antiquated practice of parish pump politics' (Michael Noonan, *Dáil Debates* 480: 1483–4, 2 October 1997). Details of some of the cases outlined in the annual reports of the office show how difficult it has sometimes been even for the Ombudsman, endowed as the office is with statutory powers to demand all the files relating to a case, to persuade the bureaucrats concerned that they should review a decision, highlighting the difficulties that ordinary citizens can encounter.

So, almost by default, people wanting assistance turn to public representatives, who cannot afford to be abrupt or offhand – TDs' jobs, unlike those of civil servants, may depend on how helpful and approachable they are. Nor is there much risk that TDs will loftily declare cases to be 'outside their jurisdiction'. TDs are very visible, available, highly responsive, and possessed of relevant expertise.

To suggest that the nature of the Irish administrative system is part of the explanation for the high volume of brokerage demands made to TDs might seem to imply that civil servants are not doing their jobs perfectly. In one sense this is true, in that if the Irish public service dealt with all cases effectively, promptly and to the complete satisfaction of the citizen, there would be no need for brokers. But no large organisation does or ever will work this way, so such a standard is unrealistic. It

would be unfair to put all the blame on civil servants. Individual civil servants may not have enough training to be as helpful to the public as they would like to be and besides, as Collins and O'Shea (2003: 105) observe, traditionally 'the public servant is not rewarded for being helpful and approachable'.

Civil servants could stifle the brokerage system only by refusing to entertain any representations from politicians. They do not do this, partly because that system suits both politicians and civil servants, especially at the local level (Komito, 1984: 188–9). It protects the bureaucrats to some extent, since politicians form a barrier between them and the public. Without politicians acting as brokers, many more people would be tackling them directly; as it is, politicians form an unofficial complaints tribunal. In this capacity politicians also provide an unpaid monitoring service; they can differentiate those who have been dealt with harshly, or have lost out on the benefit of the doubt, from those whose complaint is groundless. If a TD or councillor then makes a firm complaint about a particular case, the official can be fairly sure that it has some basis, since politicians will not risk jeopardising their ongoing relationship with the official on behalf of an undeserving constituent. So, in effect, politicians do some preliminary screening of cases and then present the strongest among them in a manner tailored to the expectations of the civil service, which helps the officials.

In return, civil servants may well give special priority to representations from TDs and respond more sympathetically than to letters of complaint or injury from ordinary members of the public. For over two decades there has been a special exclusive 'hotline' in the Department of Social Welfare to enable TDs to enquire about individual cases (statement by Minister for Social Welfare – *Dáil Debates* 421: 778–9, 23 June 1992). Similarly, when Irish Water was established in 2014 it established a 'helpdesk' to deal exclusively with queries from public representatives (D'Arcy, 2015). It is not known whether, as in Canada, experienced and skilled bureaucrats deal with the cases referred by TDs, while less qualified staff give slower and less personal attention to the complaints coming direct from ordinary citizens (Franks, 2007: 33). In addition, officials consider politicians to be more 'trustworthy'.

Politicians have a stake in maintaining good relations with officials, so officials can rectify errors without any adverse comment. Members of the public, having no stake in the status quo, cannot be similarly trusted; officials are less likely to admit, and hence to rectify, errors.

Impact of new technology

In principle we could expect new technology to reduce the need for TDs' brokerage assistance. The problems people experienced in dealing with the state bureaucracy were exacerbated in the 1960s and 1970s by the rapid growth in both the number of services being provided and the number of people looking for these services. Long delays in processing a social welfare claim, for instance, were the result of increases in the number of people applying for assistance and of an increasingly complex application procedure to decide eligibility. More recently, though, new technology has alleviated some of the difficulties. Structural improvements (such as computerisation) have reduced processing delays; the result may not suit the applicant, but at least the answer is known more quickly. This has reduced the scope for brokerage interventions by politicians – their ability to get fast answers is now a less valuable commodity.

New technology and the advent of the 'information society' might reduce the need for politicians' assistance still further by changing the relationship between government, TDs and voters. The amount of information made available has increased dramatically in recent years. The government has invested in web-based information systems that enable citizens to discover what their entitlements are and, in some cases, to apply for these electronically. This has reduced the monopoly that politicians previously enjoyed over information about entitlements and claiming procedures. Individuals can apply for services and benefits and monitor the progress of their application without recourse to politicians or even officials. Even those without access to the internet can use freephone or lo-call numbers to access officials directly and these officials can provide immediate answers to individual queries. This

is due partly to a changed attitude in the civil service, which is now more encouraging about citizen queries, but it also results from a change in the information system that enables civil servants to answer such queries for a relatively low 'transaction cost'. Part of the reason for going to politicians before was that the 'cost' of answering a query was relatively high. The person dealing with the query had to be located, the necessary file had to be dug out, details might have to be checked with other bureaucrats, and so on. Only a politician was important enough to warrant such an investment of time. With new office technologies, the cost of dealing with the query has been significantly reduced, so answering a citizen's query is now affordable.

There is also, perhaps partly as a result of corruption investigations and tribunals, more transparency in how scarce resources (such as public housing) are allocated to applicants and so less scope for political intervention in the administrative process. This seems to have increased the level of general policy interventions that politicians are requested to make (as opposed to interventions for personal services). However, local queries on matters such as parking and the painting of railings in public buildings still arrive for TDs.

New technologies are also having an impact on communication between politicians and constituents. An increasing number of politicians have their own web sites, containing contact details, in order to enhance their visibility. Many TDs, especially in urban areas, encourage constituents to contact them electronically and, as noted above, by 2016 email had become the most common method by which constituents contacted TDs (Farrell *et al*., 2017). This reduces their work load, as electronic queries can be received and processed by administrative assistants and the outcome of the query can simply be communicated electronically to the constituent. In addition, it helps the TD build up a database of names to whom newsletters and personalised mail shots can be sent, providing a cost-effective means of maintaining visibility in the constituency. On the other hand, it enables individuals to mass-mail all 158 TDs with a click of a button and, together with the emergence of interactive social media, with which most TDs feel they have to engage, means that TDs are

much more easily contactable than ever before (Murphy, 2013: 13; O'Leary, 2011: 333).

New technology does not render the constituency role of TDs redundant, though. The increase in efficiency has not been matched in most areas by any marked increase in transparency: the rules for determining eligibility remain complex, and thus the need for the assistance of someone who understands the system remains. Technological advances can result in 'more complex modes of delivery', increasing rather than reducing demand for the assistance of TDs when dealing with state bureaucracies, as has been noted in the UK (Campbell and Lovenduski, 2015: 691). Those citizens whose resources for dealing with the bureaucracy are fewest are also the least likely to be able to make meaningful use of the information society. Furthermore, there has been no great increase in the amount of trust extended to civil servants and their activities, and thus the need for someone who can be trusted to act on one's behalf remains. Politicians provide a 'one-stop shop' for voters and can be relied upon, if only for self-interested reasons, to do their best to secure that a successful outcome is achieved; citizens may not feel equally confident that an unknown bureaucrat will make the same effort.

Consequences of TDs' constituency work

Some of the consequences of the constituency role of TDs are highly tangible, while others are less so. Brokerage work affects the operation of the political and administrative systems, and some suggest that it plays a part in shaping political culture. We shall look at its impact on the Dáil, the government and the civil service, and consider its effects on people's attitudes towards politics generally.

Impact on the Dáil and the government

This is the most obvious and tangible area in which brokerage has an impact. Dealing with casework reduces the time available for formal parliamentary duties such as

examining legislation and discussing policy, which weakens the Dáil's ability to provide effective scrutiny of government and to contribute to policy formation, and for these reasons some deplore TDs' immersion in constituency duties. However, as we saw in Chapter 7, there are obviously many other reasons why the Dáil is less powerful than the government, and it is open to question how much stronger it would be if TDs had less constituency work. Moreover, there is no reason why, with an adequate provision of support staff, politicians should not be able both to provide a service for constituents and to be active parliamentarians (Chubb, 1992: 210).

It is also sometimes suggested that even ministers are overburdened with constituency work and are unable to devote enough time to government business (FitzGerald, 2003: 93). However, in recent years ministers have used civil servants to do most of their constituency work for them. A series of parliamentary questions tabled by Fine Gael TDs in December 2008 and January 2009 asked about the size of each minister's private office and constituency office. It turned up the information that the 15 cabinet ministers and 20 ministers of state collectively had 403 civil servants in their private offices and looking after their constituency work, at a cost of around €18.7 million a year (the findings are summarised in O'Halloran, 2008 and 2009). Of the 216 staff employed by cabinet ministers, 76 were specifically described as looking after the ministers' constituency work, but the line between this and the 'private office' may not be clear-cut; indeed, one minister acknowledged in 1993 that 'staff are not formally divided between constituency and other duties. The situation varies from day to day in each office and staff carry out appropriate duties as the need arises' (Joe Walsh, Minister for Agriculture, *Dáil Debates* 427: 1854, 11 March 1993). Given that each cabinet and junior minister has, therefore, an average of 12 civil servants, paid for by the taxpayers, to assist in his or her constituency and political work, it is hard to believe that brokerage can be a major burden on the shoulders of ministers. On a more modest scale, individual TDs now receive allowances towards the cost of running a constituency office, and it may well be that,

as in Canada, 'more office staff leads to more constituency service work, not to more time and attention devoted to broad policy matters' (Franks, 2007: 40).

Impact on the work of the civil service

The constituency work of TDs serves many useful functions for citizens, but this does not mean that all of its consequences are beneficial, or that there is no such thing as excess. We noted earlier that TDs may do some preliminary screening of cases before deciding which ones to take up with officials. However, even if a TD realises that a particular case is hopeless, he or she may not want to say this bluntly to the constituent. The safer option is to forward the case to the civil service, perhaps even putting down a parliamentary question, though of course without using up credit with contacts in the civil service by flagging it as a deserving case. When this happens on a large scale, there is an obvious cost to the civil service in time and money. Each question has to be followed up fully and all the details have to be investigated, even if the answer turns out to be something straightforward such as the person's simply not being eligible. Tales abound of civil servants or ministers, faced with even minor decisions, discovering that the matter is the subject of correspondence from several TDs and perhaps councillors too. Sometimes, undoubtedly, TDs do make representations even if they can see that a case is 'a dead duck' because 'it can be the only way to get people off your back'; only a response in writing will satisfy the constituent that nothing more could have been done (Éamon Ó Cuív TD in *Irish Times* 13 April 2002). Examining these representations also costs civil servants time that could be spent dealing with other things so, ironically, some TDs, by clogging up the works with pointless representations, described by Fintan O'Toole as a Kafkaesque 'whirling blizzard of paper-pushing', may exacerbate the delays about which they complain (O'Toole and Dooney, 2009: 341–2; O'Toole, 2011: 42). Whether it really follows that citizens would get a better service were it not for TDs taking up the cudgels on their behalf is, of course, another matter.

Individualisation of social conflict

Michael D. Higgins (1982: 133) has argued that clientelism 'disorganises the poor'; it encourages them to seek an individual solution to a problem such as poverty rather than to see the problem as fundamental to society and take part in collective action to try to redress it. It fosters vertical links, from the TD to the constituent, rather than horizontal ones between people in the same position, such as the poor or the unemployed. Clientelism engenders competition rather than cooperation between people in similar vulnerable positions, each one seeking privileged treatment rather than equality. Thus, he concluded (p. 135), it is 'exploitative in source and intent'. Its origins lie in the dependency of the poor, 'the structural fact of poverty', and in the uneven distribution of resources such as wealth, knowledge and access, and it perpetuates this dependency by heading off any demand for more fundamental changes. Hazelkorn has also argued that clientelism redirects incipient class conflict into channels that emphasise the role of individuals rather than of classes: 'the effect has been to retard the political development and consciousness of the economically dominated classes' (Hazelkorn, 1986: 339). She suggested that for left-wing TDs 'to operate in constituencies through clinics could be politically disastrous in the long-term', as this would reduce the chances of horizontal class links building up among the dominated classes (Hazelkorn, 1986: 340).

What exactly is meant by 'clientelism' in these accounts? Hazelkorn seemed to regard all the constituency work of a TD as clientelism: 'Irish clientelism involves individuals who seek out their TD ... in order to acquire some benefit or service which they feel they would not receive by their own, or their group's efforts' (Hazelkorn, 1986: 327; cf. Higgins, 1982: 118–19). If politicians who help constituents sort out problems that the constituents could not resolve by themselves are behaving in a 'clientelistic' fashion, then clientelism exists in virtually every country in the world and cannot explain much about Ireland specifically. Higgins became a TD in 1981 and in that role was once asked on television whether he now engaged in the clientelistic practices that he had earlier deplored. His answer drew a distinction

between, on the one hand, politicians attempting to give the impression that they were achieving results through manipulation and, on the other hand, politicians helping people to obtain their rights (RTÉ1, Prime Time, 25 February 1997). The feeling remains that the term 'clientelism' is being used very loosely in these arguments.

TDs' readiness to offer helpful advice to constituents would come well down the list as an explanation for the absence of socialism in Ireland. It may well be that politicians' brokerage work reduces the level of alienation among those who seek their assistance, and thereby acts as a force for the stability, rather than for the radical transformation, of a social structure marked by clear inequalities. However, it is far-fetched to imagine that if politicians refused to help their constituents with their problems, the result would be an unstoppable build-up of demand for collective action that would rectify many of society's ills. It is hard to see how someone concerned about a delay in their pension payment, say, can tackle the immediate problem except in individual terms, and it is not necessarily irrational for individuals to seek to solve their own short-term problems rather than to try to transform society first. Although it is true that the 'welfare officer' role of members of parliament involves solving the problems of individuals – as it does in every country – the 'local promoter' role entails work for collectivities. The case against constituency work on the ground that it is a barrier to the left in Ireland remains unproven.

Impact on perceptions of the political system

There is some disagreement about how constituency work affects perceptions of the political system. Some, such as Bax (1976: 51–2) feel that it performs a linkage role and has an integrative effect; it brings citizens and the central state machinery closer together. TDs, by providing a 'helping hand and a friendly ear', as P. J. Sheehan (quoted above) put it, can serve the functions of humanising the state in the eyes of people who would otherwise see it as remote and countering the cynicism that attaches to 'politicians' generically. As has been noted in Britain, the effect is to build support for the political system by making people feel that there is at least someone

who will listen to their problem and is 'on their side' (Norton and Wood, 1993: 50–5). Moreover, through constituency work, information is transmitted in both directions; politicians are kept fully in touch with their constituents, and will be quickly alerted to any general problems, for example about the way in which a department is implementing a policy. A Labour TD commented 'I learn more about the impact our economic recession is having on our country and its people from constituency clinics and local meetings than I ever could from articles or books' (Joanna Tuffy, *Irish Times,* 12 March 2009).

Others take a negative view, believing that brokerage perpetuates a mistaken belief that government and the civil service do not work in a fair and rational manner. Dick Roche, a public administration specialist as well as a TD for a number of years, has argued that the practice of approaching a politician with complaints about the civil service has had 'a corrosive impact on political life. It undermined the confidence in the administrative system and its impartiality, and it also gave rise to the view that just about everything could be fixed' (*Dáil Debates* 482: 929, 6 November 1997; cf. O'Toole and Dooney, 2009: 342). Sacks (1976: 221–5) also believes that much constituency work propagates the notion that citizens improve their chances of getting something from the state by approaching it via a TD, and this perpetuates citizens' negative and suspicious views of the political system. In turn this reinforces personalism and localism, the tendency to trust only those with whom one has some personal or local connection, which Sacks regarded as important and pre-modern elements in Irish political culture. However, as we pointed out earlier, the bureaucratic view according to which people's use of TDs is irrational has been challenged by detailed research, according to which TDs can be of genuine help to constituents, not by 'fixing' matters improperly but by securing the legitimate redress of grievances or, at least, obtaining a satisfactory explanation of a decision.

Conclusion

Irish citizens expect their members of parliament to be active constituency representatives, taking up their personal or communal problems or grievances with the relevant government department. Although some have sought distinctively Irish explanations for this, a heavy constituency workload is the norm for parliamentarians around the world, and the main reason tends to be the same everywhere: quite simply, representing one's constituents is a central part of the job of a member of parliament in every country. The volume of constituency work takes time that TDs could, at least in theory, devote to their formal parliamentary responsibilities, and also has an impact on the functioning of the civil service. Among some commentators on Irish politics, constituency work tends to be regarded as a negative phenomenon. It is often branded 'clientelism', a term with a multitude of unfavourable connotations (largely due to the private and individual, rather than public and collective, nature of politician–voter interactions), yet it is clear that Irish politics is not clientelistic in the conventional sense of the term. As in other countries, constituency work has both negative and positive consequences: it may weaken the ability of parliament to provide effective scrutiny of government and to make an input to policy-making, yet it provides a vital link between citizen and state, reduces alienation, and provides feedback on the effects of government policies. The constituency role of TDs is a central aspect of the Irish political system, and its consequences continue to generate argument and discussion.

Table 8.1: Extent of contact between citizens and TDs, 2002–16

	2002	2006	2011	2016
All	21.4	15.6	12.0	15.8
N	2,642	1,061	1,818	1,000

Note: in 2002 figures refer to those contacting a TD in the previous five years, while in 2006, 2011 and 2016 they refer to a one-year period.
Source: for 2002–11, Gallagher and Suiter 2017: 154; for 2016, Red C INES survey, Q2a.

Box 8.1 **Irish politicians and the perceived delivery of largesse**

Between 1997 and 2002 the minority Fianna Fáil–Progressive Democrat administration reached agreements with four independent TDs under which the latter would support the government in exchange for spending on specified projects in their constituencies. Similarly, after the 2007 election Bertie Ahern, prior to his re-election as Taoiseach, secured the support of a number of independent TDs in exchange for commitments that were not made public (O'Malley, 2008: 210–11). The minority government elected in 2016 was also dependent on independent TDs, and there were plenty of rumours and allegations that some of these had sought to extract particularistic benefits for their home patch, though it was difficult to establish the truth or otherwise of these.

Critics from other constituencies argued that it was wrong that money that should have been spent in the national interest was going disproportionately to certain constituencies simply because these TDs were in a pivotal position. At the same time, others suggested that there was no evidence that the TDs could claim legitimate credit for the projects and that the government was securing the support of the independent TDs without actually doing anything it would not have done anyway. While it would be very difficult to establish the objective truth of politicians' ability to influence spending decisions, there is little doubt that there is a widespread public perception, encouraged by many politicians and commentators, that this is the case.

For example, in December 2003 the government announced a plan to decentralise government departments from Dublin to locations around the country. The junior minister Tom Parlon immediately issued leaflets in his constituency headed 'Parlon Delivers! 965 jobs!', listing the five towns concerned and the number of jobs each was set to receive – though it was later alleged that he had played no part in the decision but had merely got wind of it before it was announced. In the event the decentralisation programme was widely criticised as ill thought out and was largely unfulfilled, and Parlon lost his seat at the next election. Likewise, in September 2012 a junior minister at the Department of Health, Róisín Shortall, resigned in protest after a list of areas where new primary care centres were to be set up was amended by the Minister for Health James Reilly, who inter alia added two in his own constituency on the basis of far-from-transparent criteria – but Reilly lost his seat at the next election.

Ministers are expected to secure largesse for their home base or for the constituency as a whole. Names such as Pádraig Flynn in Castlebar, Michael Lowry in Thurles, Ray MacSharry in Sligo, and Dick Spring in Tralee are often cited in this context. Waterford has had only two cabinet ministers since the 1980s, and one commentator at the 2016 election was in no doubt about the impact of one of these in particular: 'We have chopped and changed our TDs, but it was only with the advent of Martin Cullen and to a much lesser extent Austin Deasy that we saw what cabinet influence can do. There are still foolish people out there who deny the reality of the huge investment that came Waterford's way during Cullen's tenure and expect you to believe that this stuff appeared by magic without his persistent lobbying at the cabinet table' ('Phoenix', 2016).

At the 2016 election the chair of a Portlaoise business group, in contrast, expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of largesse his county had received: 'He said he could not see what difference having a Minister has made to Laois but he has seen the impact and benefit Tullamore achieved by having Brian Cowen at a senior level in

government over many years' (Kiernan, 2016). In a similar vein, Fine Gael was seen to be losing support in Mayo in 2015 because, even though it was the Taoiseach's constituency, a 'perceived lack of government delivery' was identified in an internal party assessment (Kelly, 2015).

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Web sites

www.oireachtas.ie – site of the Oireachtas, from which there are links to the sites of those TDs who have personal web sites

www.citizensinformation.ie – site of organisation overseeing Citizens Information Centres and source of a great deal of on-line information about dealing with the state

ombudsman.gov.ie/ – site of Ombudsman

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1. Máire Geoghegan-Quinn was a Fianna Fáil TD for Galway West from 1975 to 1997. In the 1990s the constituency was represented by 5 TDs, with a population at the 1997 election of 100,251 people. Most TDs hold 'clinics' in their constituency, setting aside a certain amount of time at designated places where constituents can come and discuss their problem with the TD.
2. It must be noted that in response to concerns about some of Bax's later work, VU Amsterdam set up a committee to investigate his record. Its report found 'scientific misconduct and fraud in academic reporting' (Baud *et al*., 2013: 37). It noted (p. 11) that doubts had been expressed about the authenticity of his fieldwork in Ireland but it was not in a position to investigate this.
3. The Head of Kinsale and the Dursey Sound are approximately 80 miles apart.