

**HOW HAS THE ADOPTION OF THE  
PRIVATE SECTOR SUBSTANTIVE  
AGENDA IMPACTED ON THE  
PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT OF FIRE  
FIGHTERS IN DUBLIN FIRE BRIGADE**

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## Abstract

This dissertation explores the employment relationship of fire fighters in Dublin Fire Brigade at a time of significant change. To facilitate the exploration the research draws on the framework of the psychological contract with the addition of themes from Walton, McKersie and Cutcher-Gershenfeld's 'Strategic Negotiations' (2000)

The findings draw out both positive and negative psychological contract states of fire fighters, with variation evident depending on length of service. Approaches to achieving cost reductions, sustained contributions and increased flexibility reflected those of 'The Management Objectives in the Competiveness Era'. However, there was no evident predicted shift for all fire fighters to the components said to reflect a more transactional psychological contract. Nonetheless, an evident trend did reveal that longer serving fire fighters were experiencing this shift and was having a knock on effect on attitudes and some behaviours.

## Originality/value

Research into the psychological contracts of fire fighters in Dublin Fire Brigade with the inclusion of Walton et al's (2000) theory of employment relations has not been done before. Additionally, the qualitative method chosen to investigate the psychological contract is in contrast with the quantitative method advocated by the Chartered Institute of Personnel. It therefore offers an alternative approach.

Keywords, Dublin Fire Brigade, Employment Relations, Psychological Contract, Substantive Agenda, New Public Management, Fire Fighters, Human Resource Management, Public Sector

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*In memory of Philip Campbell and Brian Dempsey*

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List of Abbreviations

CPA	Croke Park Agreement
DFB	Dublin Fire Brigade
FF	Fire Fighters
NPM	New Public Management
PC	Psychological Contract

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

## Chapter one - Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Niall O'Connor of the Irish Times reported on the 27<sup>th</sup> August 2012 that ambulance bases in Dublin, as a result of cut backs, will suffer rolling closures from next month. He asserts that this is a consequence of a deal struck between paramedics and the Health Service Executive under the Croke Park Agreement (CPA) leaving 'local Dublin City Fire Brigade ambulance crew to cover the 70,000 population' (O'Connor 2012). This knock on impact on Dublin Fire Brigade (DFB) is one example of the effect of cost reductions sought by the Government under the CPA. This thesis endeavours to explore the effect such challenges present to fire fighters' and their relationship with their employer, Dublin City Council (DCC).

The psychological contract (PC), concerned with the mutuality of obligation between employers and employees, offers an appropriate framework for gaining insight into the repercussions of the current economic uncertainties for employees of DFB. 'the psychological contract can be useful for understanding how macro and micro changes to the employment relationship affect employee's experience of work (Conway & Briner 2009 p 72). This research conducted a micro exploration of the current state of the PC to unveil the affects of changes associated with the CPA on FFs in DFB.

To capture potentially broader implications or affects of the CPA on FFs the research drew from theory associated with employment relations. Walton, Cutcher-Gerfled & McKersie's (2000) Strategic Negotiations provided the theoretical framework within which this exploration was conducted.

Chapter two provides the conceptual frameworks applicable to this exploration. Chapter three then provides justification for the choice of a qualitative method and sets out the corresponding requirements. It also explains how arising hurdles were overcome and challenges to which the methodology had to succumb. Chapter four sets forth interview participants' revelations under the major themes drawn from the literature and theory.

This assists the discussion that proceeds in the final chapter, chapter five.

This chapter must first provide some context to assist understanding going forward and paint a picture of the broader environment in which FFs' are employed.

## 1.2 Rationale

The rationale for exploring the employment relationship for FFs stemmed originally from an appreciation of the work they do. The question arose, on learning of the theory of the PC, how were FFs, who risk their health, both mental and physical, for the sake of others responding to public sector cuts and changes.

## 1.3 Context

### 1.3.1 Brief history of Dublin Fire Brigade

In 1862, twenty two years after the establishment of Dublin Corporation (now Dublin City Council), DFB was established. Before this fire services in Ireland had existed in different forms for centuries. It was during the nineteenth century that insurance companies began to develop fire brigades whose responsibility it was to extinguish fires on properties of the insurance company's clients. The Fire Services Act 1981 that saw the introduction of fire authorities in Ireland who were responsible for training of fire personnel, fire-fighting and fire safety (Blues & Twos 2012 p. 1). DCC remained the

employer and continues to do so today. While nationally the fire brigade is run by the relevant local authorities the Department of Community and Environment governs over it. 'This Department provides the planning and legislative framework for the enforcement of fire safety and the operation of the fire service through the Fire Services Act, 1981' (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government 2007 p 1)

### 1.3.2 Dublin Fire Brigade today

DFB is the largest full time brigade in the country providing fire and emergency response service to 1.2 million people throughout the city and county of Dublin (DCC 2012 p 1). The areas covered by DFB are Dublin City, Fingal (North County Dublin), South Dublin (South County Dublin) and Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown. There are 12 full-time stations with the headquarters being located in Townsend Street, Dublin 1.

The seven services supplied by DFB are as follows, 1) Emergency response to fire, flooding, road accidents, chemical incidents and other hazards 2) Ambulance service (as support to the Health Service Executive) 3) Water rescue services 4) Provision of Fire Safety Licences to builders and developers 5) Provision of licences to public events 6) Auxiliary fire service 7) Training in fire safety and first aid for business.

According to Dublin City Council's website careers in the fire brigade fall into three categories namely, full-time fire-fighter, retained fire-fighters and full-time fire prevention officer. The operation grades or 'rank' system within the DFB are as follows, Chief Fire Officer, Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Third Officer, District Officer, Station Officer, Sub Officer, Leading Fire Fighter and Fire Fighter. The target group of

this thesis is full-time fire-fighters the main duties of which are ‘ to help protect the public in emergency situations’ (DCC 2012 p 1)

### 1.3.3 Impact of austerity on Dublin Fire Brigade’s budget

‘There has been substantial increase in capital investment in the fire services since 2000, with money going towards infrastructure and equipment, better training and the provision of improved communications infrastructure’ (Emergency Services Ireland 2011 p 27)

As a result of this increased capital investment the Irish Fire Service’s equipment and infrastructure have been modernised and brought up to best international standards

‘Fire authorities are equipped to address the full range of risks with which they now have to deal and funding has contributed to the ability of fire authorities to respond promptly and effectively to fire and other emergency situations In 2009, 34 new fire appliances were acquired by fire authorities In addition, funding to acquire emergency equipment such as Road Traffic Collision equipment, Thermal Imaging Cameras and telecommunications equipment is made available’ (Environ 2007 p 1)

However, this type of capital investment has inevitably changed as a result of the Irish financial crisis emerging in 2007

‘Events since 2007, both domestic and global, have often been described in the media and elsewhere as the perfect storm A financial and banking crisis led to an economic (and fiscal, not to mention social) crisis that surpasses anything since the Great Depression of the 1930s The economic collapse in Ireland, culminating in the 2010 EU-IMF financial assistance programme, has been one of the worst in the developed world’ (Turley 2011 p 4)

From the period from 2008 to 2011 DCC saw one of its sources of funding, the Local Authority Fund Allocation, drop from €105mil to €78.7mil In budget 2012 this same funding allocation was down by another €7.1m Commercial rates, another source of income for DCC was also down by 2% in 2012 Dublin Fire Brigade (DFB), the largest department in DCC, inevitably is also experiencing financial challenges

‘The estimated cost of the Dublin Fire and Ambulance Service is €112m in 2011 and this represents an increasing proportion, at 7%, of the revenue budgets of the four Dublin Local Authorities. It represents 13.3% of the DCC Budget as the regional service provider’ (DCC 2011 p 6)

#### 1.4 The Croke Park Agreement

Social Partnership, between the Government, employers and trade unions, was introduced in Ireland in the late 1980’s during a severe economic recession (INOU 2012 p 1). For twenty two years this bargaining system remained in place in Ireland until in 2009. In 2009 the ‘Financial Emergency Measures Act in the Public Interest Act 2009’ was introduced by the Government to allow for reductions in public sector pay and pensions. Unions, engaged in social partnership with the Government at the time, could not agree to these new proposals which were,

- Public sector pension levy
- Reduction of pay of public service employees
- The reduction of pensions being paid to retired public servants

(Referendum 2011 p 1)

which saw collective bargaining separate into two systems. For the public sector the CPA became the replacement system for negotiations (Spotlight 2011 p 3)

The CPA is an agreement between the Government and the Public Services Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and other officials representing public service staff (Implementation Body 2012 p 1)

‘Under the Croke Park Agreement, public service staff and their managers are working together to reform and change the way the Public Services does its business so that costs and staff numbers can be reduced significantly. At the same time, the Agreement is helping to ensure that services and especially

frontline services are maintained to the greatest extent possible and the experience of citizens accessing services is improved' (Fitzpatrick 2011 p 1)

The CPA reflects the aspirations of New Public Management (NPM) a neo-liberalist approach to governing 'There are also internal changes in the cultures and identities of public services as traditional administrative and professional bureaucracies are being transformed into managerial bureaucracies based upon business principles and practices imported from the private sector' (Horton, S 2006 p 533) This is further discussed in the literature review in chapter two

## 1.5 Contribution of the research

'There is a considerable body of literature that reports the impacts of 'positive' and 'negative' psychological contracts and the relationship between these psychological states and levels of motivation and performance of workers in a variety of sectors of the economy. One area of the economy and world of work in which these topics appear to have been little discussed in the literature is in relation to the 'uniformed services' the police and the armed services and in particular the consequences of a negative psychological contract between the members of these services and their 'employer' the Crown' (Imroth, Pye & Stead 2005 p 24)

## 1.6 Conclusion

This introductory chapter assists in placing FFs in DFB in the broader organisational and economic scenes directly related to their employment. The following chapter sets out the theoretical scene of concepts utilised in this research to explore FFs' employment relationship



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

## Chapter two – A conceptual framework

### 2.1 Introduction

The multifaceted evolution of the Psychological Contract has continued to challenge theorists to find a universally agreeable definition of it. This research utilises the framework of the PC to explore the employment relationship experienced by FF in DFB. As a consequence of this it is imperative to begin this literature review by briefly charting the historical development of the theory, drawing it to the point at which the currently predominant themes are understood. Themes from Walton, Cutcher-Gershenfeld & McKersie's (2000) 'Strategic Negotiations' pertinent to labour-management relations and the on-going power struggles played out in the relationship are then explored. Therefore, an explanation of the relevant themes is provided in this literature review and alternative views explored. Their relevance to the public sector is also considered.

### 2.2 The Psychological Contract

#### 2.2.1 Early Origins of the concept

'Cooperative efficiency is the resultant of individual efficiencies, since cooperation is entered into only to satisfy individual motives' (Barnard, 1938 p 44)

Chester Barnard's (1938) book 'Functions of the Executive' went beyond scientific management, the predominant movement of his time, and instead concentrated on the social dynamics specifically within organisations. Barnard's philosophical and anthropological consideration of the physical, biological and social limitations of human existence enabled him to reveal some of the social dynamics within an organisational

setting His approach brought attention to the notion of 'reciprocal exchange' reflecting the organisation's need of many individuals to work towards a larger goal in return for rewards

In the industrial context of the 1960's Chris Argyris coined the term 'psychological work contract' which he used to reflect the implicit dynamics of the exchange agreement of tangible resources between employees and managers (Taylor & Tekleab 2004 p 254) Levinson et al (1962) studies saw the uncovering of employees' expectations of their employers, which employees considered to be obligatory in nature As a result, Levinson et al (1962) argued that intangible assets of contractual relationships required equal consideration Schein (1965) emphasised the importance of recognising the expectations of all members of an organisation Where Levinson et al emphasised the obligatory nature of the contract based on each person's needs, Schein underlined the importance of matching expectations of employee and employer, to produce the best results

Reflective in these contributions are the attempts to reconcile the expectations of employees and employers in a situation where power discrepancies exist and hinder common purpose 'The full acceptance of the notion that an industrial organization is made up of sectional groups with divergent interests involves also a full acceptance of the fact that the degree of common purpose which can exist in industry is only of a very limited nature ' (Fox 1966 p 1) Fox (1966) rejects ideology of the unitary management approach based on the notion that what is good for the organisation is what is best for all its employees He asserts that the pluralist approach acknowledges all parties within the organisation have their own vested interests and management is limited in capacity

to address all of them. He advocates a co-operative approach that includes direct negotiations with workers representatives.

‘The pluralistic frame of reference, which openly concedes the severe limitations on management power, constitutes thereby a source of potential strength rather than weakness. It is a necessary - though not sufficient - basis for recognising that co-operation is unlikely to be achieved in modern industry through the attempted manipulation of "team spirit", "high morale" and "loyalty", but needs to be engineered by structural adaptations in work organisation, work rules and work practices, and that direct negotiation with work-groups is an essential part of this process’ (Fox 1996)

During this same period the early roots of social exchange theory, developed from the ethnographic observations of Malinowski (1922) in the Trobriand Islands of Melanesia and the theory of reciprocal exchange by Mauss (1922), were being applied to organisational settings. Blau (1964) highlighted the importance of the social currency of trust in the social exchanges of everyday life. These exchanges are based upon expectations of reciprocation for benefits given.

‘The concept of social exchange directs attention to the emergent properties in interpersonal relations and social interaction. A person for whom another had done a service is expected to express his gratitude and return a service when the occasion arises. Failure to express his appreciation and to reciprocate tends to stamp him as an ungrateful man who does not deserve to be helped. If he properly reciprocates, the social rewards the other receives serve as inducements

to extend further assistance, and the resulting mutual exchange of serves creates a social bond between the two' (Blau 1964 p 4)

What is evident from the brief overview above of the early development of the PC is that the concept did not develop in a linear fashion. Theorists differed in their motivations and assertions about what the concept encapsulated which in turn influenced their application of it. Their contributions were mainly disjointed from one another 'This lack of cumulative work created ambiguities that come to the fore in terms of current debates in the field' (Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall 2008 p 6)

### 2.2.2 Current understanding of psychological contract

In recent times Rousseau (1989) has been the most influential in a revival of interest in the concept. The timing of this resurgence of interest reflects academic's and manager's search for people management practices in a changing economic context (Conway & Briner 2008 p 77). Rousseau moves away from Schein's emphasis on matching the mutual expectations of organisation and employee

'When an individual perceives that contributions he or she makes obligate the organization to reciprocity (or vice versa), a psychological contract emerges. Belief that reciprocity will occur can be a precursor to the development of a psychological contract. However, it is the individual's belief in an obligation of reciprocity that constitutes the contract. This belief is unilateral, held by a particular individual, and does not constrain those of any other parties to the relationship' (Rousseau 1989 p 124)

This marks a shift in focus towards investigating only the employee's perceptions of the reciprocal obligations between them as an individual and the organisation. According to Rousseau an organisation cannot have perceptions of obligations and therefore the

PC exists only in the mind of the individual employee. This focus on solely the individual's beliefs about reciprocal obligations within the context of employee/employer relationships has remained the most widely accepted approach to date (DelCampo 2007 p 432).

The PC develops at the recruitment stage '...and the transition from candidate to employee is the realisation of the psychological contract' (Phileam & Corbridge 2006). It continues to be revised throughout the employment relationship 'Events in the form of new job assignments, relocations, and organizational restructuring may overlay new terms up old ones' (Robinson & Rousseau 1994 p 246).

### 2.2.3 Definition of the psychological contract

Considering its diverse evolution it is widely accepted that defining the PC is not easy. Rousseau defines it as 'An individual's belief in mutual obligations between that person and another party such as an employer' (Rousseau & Tijoriwala 1998 p 679). Guest's (1998) 'Is the psychological contract worth taking seriously?' highlights this issue by providing four differing definitions concluding '...the psychological contract may be about perceptions, expectations, beliefs, promises and obligations (Guest 1998 p 651). In 2002 Guest and Conway defined the psychological contract as '...the perceptions of both parties to the employment relationship – organization and individual – of reciprocal promises and obligations implied in that relationship'.

While investigating the perceptions of the employer is not within the scope of this research it is from this definition that this research precedes. While Rousseau's subjective approach unveils the importance of projected unspoken obligations upon the employer it denies consideration of the organisational norms, cultures or rules that may

be unique to one specific occupation, sector or organisation and how this may project unspoken obligations upon the employee

#### 2.2.4 Transactional and Relational contracts

Rousseau's (1990) empirical study of MBA graduate students found that two dimensions to the PC contract existed which are transactional contracts and relational contracts 'Transactional and relational contracts can be differentiated based upon their focus, time frame, stability, scope and tangibility' (Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall 2008 p 22) According to Rousseau (1989) transactional obligations are based on tangible economic exchanges such as high pay and career advancement in exchange for hard work Relational contracts are similar to Blau's (1964) social exchange theory and 'focuses upon socio-emotional exchange, with job security in exchange for loyalty as core elements' (De Cuyper & De Witte 2006 p 397) Importantly, Millward and Herriot (2000) argue that these two contracts are not mutually exclusive but rather co-exist in varying degrees

#### 2.2.5 Breach and violation

Much of the interest in the PC has been on how to create and maintain a positive PC Rousseau and Robinson (1994) found that the impact on employees that perceived the organisation to have failed to fulfil promised obligations resulted in a lowering of their commitment to the organisation and induced less positive attitudes and negative behaviours Spindler (1994) compares a legal contract to a psychological one and points to the difference of consequence of breach When a legal contract is breached the wronged party may seek amends in court However, when a PC is breached the wronged party has no similar avenue to amends 'While a legal contract creates rights

recognizable in a courtroom, a psychological contract creates emotions and attitudes which form and control behavior' (Spindler 1994 p 327)

## 2.2.6 Impact of change

The PC continues to be revised as employees and organisations are confronted with, for example, organisational or socio-economic change, which encompasses different obligations or expectations projected by in either direction

'Psychological contracts are assumed to be influenced by organizational changes in a number of ways. In the first place, the change itself may have consequences for the work situation of employees, for example when their role and tasks are affected, and they have to adapt to new circumstances and changed demands' (Freese, Schalk and Croon 2011 p 405)

CIPD (2005) question if assertions that there has been a shift from a relational to a transactional contract, said to be consequential of the undermining of the traits familiar with traditional employee/employer relations, may be exaggerated. However, in noting this they make exception for sectors that have undergone severe changes in the UK

'In central government, for example, the psychological contract has traditionally offered not only a high degree of job security, but also stability and generous pensions. Currently, all three seem to be under threat and, particularly set against the aspiration of Government to be a 'good employer', this may appear to be a fairly fundamental breach in the traditional contract. This in turn may prejudice the ability of public sector employers to introduce reform successfully' (CIPD 2005 p 5)

This threat to the 'traditional' PC can create a shift of emphasis, for both employer and employees, from a relational to transactional contract

'This refocusing of the employer-employee relationship can create the transactional psychological, replacing a relational psychological contract whereby both parties sustain the employment relationship all the time there is 'something in it for them', it is self-centred rather than familial' (Pilbeam & Corbridge 2006 p 7)



Therefore the focus of human resource professionals and employers should be to avoid such breaches and actively work towards maintaining positive psychological contracts

‘Where there is a reduction in employees’ belief in a ‘felt fair’ employment relationship, and a consequent erosion of their trust in that relationship, the consequences for the organisation can be grave. In the changing economic and employment landscape, organisations need to develop HR strategies that forge a durable psychological contract between employer and employees’ (Harrison & Kessels 2004 p 27)

### 2.2.7 Exploring the state of the psychological contract

To follow the logic of current understandings of the PC, specifically with reference to the public sector, it is reasonable to question if the change and reforms being sought by the Irish Government could symbolise a ‘fundamental breach’ of the traditional PC similar to CIPD’s (2005) prediction about the public sector in the UK. It is important to be cognisant of the possibility of this not being the case as some may be more aware of change than others. For example newer employees may have nothing to compare change against or may not have the same level of awareness than their longer employed colleagues.

‘For new recruits, there is no standard of comparison, jobs can grow harder without the workers involved necessarily becoming aware of this. Such developments often occur gradually’ (Edwards & Whitston 1991 p 598)

The new PC offers facets of employment that were not as available as before. These facets may be favoured by new entrants into DFB.

‘The newest generation of workers appears to be in a good position to take advantage of the many opportunities that exist under the current psychological contract (e.g., high compensation and highly flexible work arrangements). In contrast, older workers who have spent the majority of their careers under the more traditional psychological contract may have fewer opportunities and be less optimistic’ (DeMeuse, Bergmann & Lester 2001 p 105)

Therefore, exploring the state of FFs’ PC in DFB offers an opportunity to consider the impact of the reforms and changes on their relationship with their employer.

‘The idea of a psychological contract has become fashionable as a normative rhetoric and as an analytical insight into the changing nature of the employment relations and the ‘new deal’ being offered by employers’ (Martin, Staines & Pate 1998 p 20)

This new deal comes at a time when, according to Spindler (1994), employers, now more than ever, need a committed, engaged and energetic workforce ‘Renting backs is no longer enough, we must now excite and engage minds and cultivate attitudes’

According to Wellin (2007) the PC can be used as a powerful vehicle to drive behaviour and business performance. To do this PC is utilised as a means of monitoring employee attitudes and behaviours and regulating the employment relationship (Guest 1998, CIPD 2010). The focus is on maintaining a positive psychological contract.

‘Good psychological contracts may not always result in superior performance, or indeed in satisfied employees, but poor psychological contracts tend to act as demotivators, which can be reflected in lower levels of employee commitment, higher levels of absenteeism and turnover, and reduced performance’ (Beardwell & Claydon 2007 p 507)

Guest, Conway & Briner (1996) advocate ‘progressive HRM practices’ as a means to pursuing a positive PC which they assert is linked to higher commitment, employee satisfaction and better employee relations.

What is not considered in the theory of the PC is the broader socio-economic environment and the impact on how new reforms and approaches are being negotiated and what this reflects in the employment relations arena. ‘subsequent research on the construct must seek to embed it within a deeper political economy of capitalism and to consider such issues as power in order to add a great theoretical richness to future studies’ (Cullinane & Dundon 2006 p 21). Therefore, to attend to these shortcomings this study considers changes in employment relations guided by Walton, McKersie & Cutcher-Gershenfeld theory in ‘A theory of change in Labour-Management Relations –

Strategic Negotiations' (2000) Nonetheless, the PC as a framework enables previously hidden aspects of employee/employer relationships to be identified and considered (Tyagi & Agrawal 2010 p 383) and so is utilised to this end in this research

### 2.3 Substantive agenda

Walton, Cutcher-Gershenfeld and McKersie's (2000) book 'Strategic Negotiations A Theory of Change in Labour-Management Relations' takes an in-depth look at the industrial relations landscape in America, at the time of writing, through the lens of strategic negotiations. They identified changes in labour-management relations in private sector organisations evolving from increased 'industrial competitiveness'. One change that was apparent was the reversing of roles of labour and management whereby management is now more likely to 'initiate changes in the collective bargaining agreement' (Walton et al 1992 p 283). Prior to this it was usually the unions who initiated the agenda for negotiations. 'Among newly established workplaces, union recognition is rare, where unions do retain a formal presence, managers have attempted to erode their influence, through the use of sophisticated HRM techniques' (Williams & Smith 2006 p 173). With the Irish public sector being a highly unionised one, and also with the introduction of the CPA, these changes in the private sector management approach both with and to unions need consideration. Their research found that 'Management Objectives in the Competitiveness Era' are reflected in the new agendas of management which are broken into two, one being the substantive agenda, which is relevant to this study, and the other the social agenda. The new substantive agenda is focussed especially on three areas: reduced payroll costs, increased flexibility, and sustained contributions by individual workers (Walton et al 2000 p 7).

‘Today, the mutual compliance relationship is the approach preferred by many companies. Indeed, many companies have reacted to competitive pressures by shifting the terms of employment in ways favourable to management and increasing management’s capacity to enforce labour compliance’ (Walton et al 2000 p 10)

### 2.3.1 Forcing and fostering

By examining labour negotiations they further reveal that management now achieve their objectives through three negotiation strategies ‘escape the existing labor relationship (e.g., by transferring operations), force labor to make substantive concessions, or foster substantive and social change’ (Walton et al 2000)

### 2.3.2 New Public Management and the substantive agenda

The economic and competitive drivers stimulating management’s new agenda have also been the rationale for seeking reform and change in the public sector. Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2000) acknowledge these pressures of globalisation, restructuring and downsizing and highlight the implications they are having on employee relations in the public sector in the UK.

‘The public sector has been subject to a range of pressures over the last decade that have arguably placed issues of organizational survival and affordability as the driving force behind treatment of employees. A progressive tightening of financial regimes, the introduction of competitive market forces and a closer monitoring of organizational performance through the use of a battery of measures and targets have challenged traditional features of employment in the public sector. Old certainties such as job security, pay levels based on ‘fair’ comparisons, pay increases maintaining living standards, career opportunities founded on clear and stable paths have all been threatened’ (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler 2000 p 904)

The theory of New Public Management (NPM) advocates the application of private sector approaches to the public sector which includes the adaptation of measures, targets and monitoring of organisational performance outlined above.

‘NPM, in short, is largely derived from private sector management and its entrepreneurial characteristics and implies that if government performs like the private sector, it will be effective and more efficient. And citizens, as customers, will be more satisfied with the government as well’ (Gultekin 2011 p 345)

In 2005 Dermot McCarthy, Chairperson of the National Economic and Social Council asserted that the Irish Government were taking a what Pollit & Bouckaert refer to as Modernise the Administration System approach. However, with the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, resulting in the CPA, attributes of NPM are unquestionably reflected in Ireland’s ‘Public Sector Reform 2011’ and further echo the substantive agenda of the private sector. The first lines of executive summary describe the pressures and driving forces behind it ‘Citizens and businesses expect a modern Public Service to continually improve and deliver services faster, better and more cost effectively. Innovation, flexibility and the delivery of streamlined services must be at the heart of a reformed Public Service’ (Public Service Reform 2011 p 2). This document outlines the reform initiatives and includes recommendations and actions the government purposes to implement. For the purpose of this research the recommendations that reflect the three core components of the substantive agenda, as per Walton et al (2000), have been extracted (see below). It must be noted that the recommendations in the ‘Public Service Reform 2011’ are 69 pages long.

(i) Reduced payroll costs,

this year we are expecting a reduction of some 5,000 in staff numbers across the Public Service to bring the numbers below 300,000 by the end of 2011. New high level targets for each sector will be set out at Budget time. In total, we expect to achieve a planned reduction of 37,500 staff to 282,500 by 2015, from a peak of 320,000 in 2008. When delivered, this will have reduced our gross pay bill by over €2.5 billion (or 15%) since 2008.

13.1 Deliver a reduction in Public Service Numbers to 282,500 by 2015

13.2 Review application of the moratorium on recruitment and promotions to ensure maximum savings delivered while protecting front-line service

(ii) Increased flexibility,

13.5 To maximise the potential for numbers reduction and to address emerging Government priorities on foot of the Comprehensive Review of Expenditure, put in place effective and flexible redeployment arrangements, in line with the Public Service Agreement. Greater mobility of public servants will facilitate rationalisation and support the move to greater use of shared services approaches and increased online service delivery.

(iii) Sustained contributions

12.3 Strengthen existing performance management and development systems, and extend across all sectors of the Public Service.

12.4 Introduce policies to deal with cases of underperformance, which undermines staff motivation and public confidence.

These reforms, intentional or not, signal a shift away from the traditional employment relationship, similarly signalled in PC literature, based on long-term job security and continuous development within the organisation for the employee, ‘in return for their commitment and competent performance’ (Harrison & Kessels 2004 p 26). The driving forces for reform require a new employment relationship ‘The flexible, delayed, slimmer organisation, constantly changing to suit its volatile and shifting markets, can no longer offer the secure career progression of traditional structures’ (Hiltrop 1995 get page) ~

Harrison & Kessel (2004) warn, however, that the situation needs to be kept in perspective referring to a survey in 2000 by the Economic Social Research Council in the UK which reported that ‘90% of workers had permanent employment contracts, and those workers were remaining with the same employer for an average of seven

years and four months' (Harrison & Kessel 2004 p 27) Pilbeam & Corbridge (2006) argue, however, that while jobs permanence may still be evident in some sectors the new socio-economic environment alongside the new agenda of management has impacted on employee's perceptions of the situation

' the expression of organisational and environmental uncertainty, together with the managerially projected imperative of adaption and change, has impacted upon employee perceptions of job permanence It has also impacted up on the mutuality of obligation between employer and employee with regard to traditional career patterns The end of job for life may have been subject to hyperbole, but career patterns are different and twenty-first-century workers may need to engage in continuous development and the refurbishing of skills in order to maintain employability This tends to promote a loyalty to self rather than intensify loyalty to the organisation Worker loyalty may therefore have to be purchased by the employer through the currency of self-development opportunities' (Pilbeam & Corbridge 2006 p 6)

Taking account of this new managerial agenda focussed on reduced costs, increased flexibility and sustained contributions and the inclination of managers towards forcing as a change strategy, it is important to consider the implications this has on employment relations for FF These additional employment relationship changes should impede further on the PC, specifically the relational and transactional contracts 'As a result, the old relational contracts have been violated and have been replaced by new, more transactional contracts, which are imposed rather than negotiated and based on a short-term economic exchange' (Beardwell & Claydon 2007 p 508)

However, the appropriateness of applying the new managerial agenda and the shift to a more transactional PC in the public sector has been questioned In 2002 in the UK the government of the time underwent a similar reform agenda to the present government in Ireland today According to Seifert (2002) the UK government were working on the assumption that ' the private sector could provide a better service at lower costs to the taxpayer, and, where privatisation is not a viable option, then the service should be

managed and funded as if it were in the private sector' (Seifert 2002) He argued that this 'one way to modernise' mind-set ignored important traits specific to the public sector specifically the fire service Ironside (2002) compares the private sector managerial style that is focussed on allocation of resources based on market-based demands in comparison to fire service efficiency which is based on the needs of the public and the knowledge of the frontline workers

'In the public services there is a genuine basis for agreement between managers and workers that the aim of the organisation (to educate, to cure, to protect) is worth pursuing, but the reforms blur the difference between public and private as public service staff are treated as if they work for businesses' (Ironside 2002 p 7)

In June 2012, as this research was being conducted, CIPD Ireland published their report 'Boosting HR Performance in the Irish Public Sector' Within the introduction it is acknowledged that the Irish Government is 'committed to introducing arguably the most ambitious programme of public service reform since the formation of the Irish state' (CIPD 2012) Like Guest et al (1996) it urges the inclusion of human resources in a more strategic fashion rather than the predominant transactional approach which has been prevalent to date The report's recommendation to managing the employee relationship advocates a new psychological contract which is based on good communication, meaningful consultation and increased trust with an emphasis on the value and benefits of working for the public services (CIPD 2012)

## 2.4 Conclusion

This literature review finds that the PC offers itself well as a framework to exploring the employment relationship for FF in DFB during this period of public sector reform

'the psychological contract can be useful for understanding how macro and micro



changes to the employment relationship affect employee's experience of work (Conway & Briner 2009 p 72) However, in order to overcome the short comings of the framework, as outlined by Cullinane and Dundon (2006), the literature review finds that (2000) seminal work, identifying powers shifts and new approaches of management, provides additional themes relevant to the employment relationship to explore also within the framework of the PC

## **CHAPTER THREE**

# **CHOOSING AN APPROPRIATE METHODOLOGY**

## Chapter three - Choosing an appropriate methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by outlining the necessary criteria of the research methodology considering the complexity of issues it is required to explore. It then describes and justifies the chosen methodology. The central question extracted is justified against the theory presented in the literature review. The themes drawn from the central question are presented and explained. The questions, drawn from the themes, are given and their aims provided. Following this issues pertaining to access are described and the sampling approach is given. Where the research was conducted, how it was recorded and coded and solutions to issues related to transcribing are all explicated. Important ethical considerations and the limitations of the research are also discussed before the conclusion.

### 3.2 Criteria required of methodology

The primary framework chosen to explore the employment relationship of fire fighters (FF) is the psychological contract (PC). The unspoken PC by its very nature, located in the minds of the parties engaged in the contract, is subjective and research into its condition corresponds to an interpretivist approach which ‘rests on the assumption that social reality is in our minds, and is subjective and multiple’ (Collis & Hussey 2009 p 57). Throughout the period of the research the author found no primary data investigating the state of the PC in DFB was evident or available externally from the

organisation. The same applied when seeking primary data exploring the impact of the Croke Park Agreement (CPA) on fire fighters. This research therefore endeavoured to address these gaps by obtaining primary data on both topics. The research methodology therefore needed to,

- 1) Allow participants to divulge their thoughts, opinions, perceptions, feelings and reactions about their relationship with their employer past and present
- 2) Allow the researcher to delve further into interesting and relevant avenues as they arise
- 3) Allow the researcher flexibility to adjust and alter questions as appropriate or required
- 4) Aid the researcher in creating a professional and trusting rapport
- 5) Obtain in-depth data about the phenomena of the psychological contract and reveal other phenomena if they are present

### 3.3 Possible research methodologies

Quantitative methods, derived from the natural sciences, are techniques that generate or use numerical data (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2008). Such techniques are appropriate to studying phenomena that can be expressed in terms of quantity.

Qualitative methods are subjective and utilise language and description (Lee 1992 p 87) and are ‘in-depth exploration studies (exploring for example, why students pick a particular module to study), where the opportunity for ‘quality’ responses exist’ (Biggam 2011 p 130).

### 3.3.1 Qualitative vs Quantitative

‘Qualitative data are normally transient, understood only within context and are associated with an interpretive methodology that usually results in findings with a high degree of validity’ (Collis & Hussey 2009 p 143)

The state of PC, as outlined in the literature review, is deemed to be very important phenomenon for employers and human resource professionals to be aware of and actively seek to influence (Harrison & Kessel 2004) CIPD, the accreditation body of human resource professionals, since 1996, annually publish the results of their quantitative research conducted of employees in the UK. This research measures employee attitudes in order to monitor the state of the PC (CIPD 2004 p 3). They also supply ‘practical tools’ in the form of quantitative questionnaires encouraging employers and HR professionals to follow suit with the supplied employee attitude surveys. The results of this quantitative data are supposed to influence policies and procedures of the organisation in order to best meet the obligations and expectations their employees perceive them to have. It is also used to measure the state of the PC.

Qualitative methods have been utilised to study violation (Nadin & Williams 2012), breach (Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro 2011, Suazo & Stone-Romero 2011), trust (Akinson 2007) and other variables that may stimulate or cause change to the PC or provide insight into its state (Garrow 2004).

To address the criteria necessary to assist in the exploration of complex and potentially sensitive topics a methodology that can facilitate a face to face open discourse about these topics with FFs was required. The methodology also need to be able to facilitate

the inclusion of themes associated with exploring the substantive agenda. A professional rapport needed to be developed that could invoke trust and confidence in the researcher. A quantitative questionnaire resembling one that an employer was likely to utilise itself was considered unlikely to facilitate the type of disclosures been sought

### 3.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

A focus group approach would have required a number of FF to be available all at the one time. This was not viable considering the nature of the job and also the issues pertaining to access outlined below. Ethnographic research would not have been an appropriate method to obtain the subjective perceptions and thoughts of FFs within the time allocated for this research. The emergent method of Grounded theory did not apply itself to the central questions which lead this thesis.

A semi-structured interview lent itself well to maintaining the themes under investigation while allowing for open discourse between interviewee and researcher. It also provided the ability to follow leads and new issues related to the topics as they arose (Biggam 2011 p. 146).

‘The defining characteristic of semistructured interviews is that they have a flexible and fluid structure, unlike structured interviews, which contain a structured sequence of questions to be asked in the same way of all interviewees. The structure of a semistructured interview is usually organized around an aide memoire or interview guide’ (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao 2012 p. 1021)

According to Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2008) when conducting semi-structured interviews the researcher will have themes and questions to be covered but these may

vary from interview to interview, some questions may be omitted in particular at times, the order of the questions may alter depending on the flow of conversation and additional questions may be added to explore relevant topics further

The researcher's interview guide is found in appendix 2. The nine semi-structured interview questions were drawn from the central question themes described below above. 'From these general research questions the interview develops a set of ten to fifteen open-ended research questions' (Warren & Xavia Karner 2010 p. 130). While there were only nine questions, each question had additional questions which were included to allow for further exploration when required.

#### 3.4 Central proposition

How has the adoption of the private sector substantive agenda impacted on the psychological contract of fire fighters in Dublin fire Brigade

'As the pressure on organizations to become more flexible, adaptable and efficient increases, they may engage in a set of strategies that alter employee perceptions of the employment exchange' (DeMeuse, Bergmann & Lester 2001 p. 105). It is predicted in the literature review that the type of changes being sought are likely to result in a shift of emphasis within the PC from the relational components to the transactional ones (CIPD 2005). As the CPA reflects the new change strategy being adopted by private sector managers, the question then arises whether the predicted shift in the PC is occurring for FFs in DFB. And also, what are the repercussions of this

### 3.4.1 Themes

To address these propositions the researcher drew three themes from that needed exploration,

- (i) The state of the PC
- (ii) Substantive agenda
- (iii) Evidence of transactional shift

Semi-structured interview questions were then influenced by these themes and are set out below. Questions pertaining to exploring theme (i) & theme (iii) are presented together as they were both directly related to the PC. How the themes aimed to address the central question are also explained. Following this the same process is employed for theme (ii).

#### 3.4.1.1 Theme (i) The state of the PC & (iii) Evidence of a transactional shift

The state of the PC is concerned with employees/employers perception of whether the respective other has fulfilled their obligations within the contract, if they are perceived as fair and if they will continue to be met in the future (Guest & Conway 2004). In order to explore the state of the PC it was important to firstly obtain a point of reference to compare how the PC was faring now. A point of orientation was also required to explore if there had been a shift of emphasis towards the more transactional components of the PC post the CPA. The following questions aimed then to achieve this,



Q 1 Can you tell me about what influenced you to join DFB and what part of the occupation you are most passionate about?

Aims

- Ice breaker
- Identify motivators
- See further on if these motivations have changed, been challenged, inducing positive/negative behaviours that could be developed/addressed

Q 2 What obligations did you believe your employer had towards you as an employee at the time and have these changed since then?

Aims

- Identify and classify obligations into transactional/relational contract components
- Explore if their priorities/concerns resemble a shift of emphasis onto the more transactional components

Q 3 What obligations did you believe your employer considered you to have towards them at the time and have these changed since then?

Aims

- Identify and classify original obligations into relational/transactional
- Explore if FFs believed they had fulfilled their side of the deal
- Explore if changes reflect substantive agenda

Having provided for obtaining a point of reference the following questions aimed then at obtaining a point of comparison, post the CPA

Q 5 How has the CPA impacted on you as an employee?

Aims

- Obtain a point of comparison for the exploration of the current state of the PC
- Transactional shift

Q 6 Do you perceive changes in your employer's approach to managing employees?

Aims

- Obtain a point of comparison for the exploration of the current state of the PC and transactional shift

Q 7 Do you believe your loyalty and trust have been affected at all as a result of the CPA?

Aims

- Mutual loyalty and mutual trust are key components of the relational contract and therefore this question aims quite simply to reveal if employees PC are shifting emphasis to the more transactional components as a result of changes instigated in employment relations as a result of the CPA. It also provides the point of comparison required for revelations to questions one, two and three and in turn the exploration of the state of the PC

Q 8 Is this occupation still a viable long-term one?

Aims

- Explore if there was an issue of job security (relational) or viability an issue (transactional) and compare it to what influenced FFs to join the force, revealed in Q 1
- Reveal anything that might be impeding the occupations viability or what might be influencing FFs to stay

- It is also a point of comparison to answers to Q 2 and Q 3 above Q 9 What could your employer do to induce positive attitudes and behaviours in you as an employee at this time of financial austerity?

Aims To explore if employees favour more transactional or relational components of the PC contract

#### 3 4 1 2 Theme (ii) Substantive agenda

To explore this theme, this research needed to extract FF's views of the public sector reform agenda (in the form of the CPA) and also ascertain if, within these expressed views, aspects of the substantive agenda arose, within what context they arose and explore what effect, if any, they were having on employee's employment relationship As outlined in the literature review by (Walton et al 2000), the substantive agenda is said to be reflected in the agenda of management in the private sector towards employment relations and specifically negotiations The most predominant components of the substantive agenda are a) cost reductions b) increased flexibility c) sustained contributions While the driving force for the Public Sector Reform 2011 was an economic crisis the changes aspired to in the reform programme reflect the private sector substantive agenda components above, as shown in the literature review

#### Q 4 What does the CPA mean to you?

Aims

- establish awareness and meaning of the topic
- avoid leading questions
- allow space for elements of the substantive agenda arise

#### Q 5 How has the CPA impacted on you as an employee?

### Aims

- explore if any of the three elements of the substantive agenda arise

Q 6 Do you perceive changes in your employer's approach to managing employees?

### Aims

- Explore if the new managerial approach, found by Walton et al (2000), is evident or impacting FFs current experiences of management

### 3.5 Access

Warren and Xavia Karner (2010) assert that a common way of finding interviewees involves seeking out locations in which they can normally be found within the community or on social media. Numerous avenues were attempted to gain access, directly going to the fire station, utilisation of social media, calling the associated union officials and directly requesting permission from the HR department of DFB. 'However, finding actual respondents to interview within the parameters the researcher has set up, without the assistance of a cooperating organization, can be a daunting task' (Warren & Xavia Karner 2010 p. 143). Directly appealing to the researcher's own friends, through social media or directly by phone, who had personal connections with fire fighters, accumulated the best results.

All conversations leading up to the interviews, including by phone, text or social media were used as opportunities to establish important requisites such as a sense of professionalism, trust and credibility.

### 3.6 Characteristics of the sample

As a consequence of the issues related to access it was not reasonable to have strict sampling criteria. As a result two participants were above the rank of FF but one of these had only recently moved up the ranks. The other was a station officer who was knowledgeable in the theory of the PC.

### 3.7 Social setting

‘Here such factors as location, type of day, time of day, social constraints, physical and social arrangements and interruptions need to be considered. These physical and temporal arrangements are always of considerable importance’ (Wengraff 2001 p. 11)

Though, from the outset, a natural setting was not guaranteed the researcher succeeded in conducting all ten interviews within fire stations with the permission of the relevant station officers. This assisted in creating a sense of legitimacy and professionalism to the research. The hours the interviews were conducted varied depending on the preference of the station officer and the timetable of the fire fighting personnel. Some took place at night others during the day. Professional dress assisted in portraying the legitimacy of the researcher’s endeavours. Thankfully all interviews were conducted without interruption.

### 3.8 Transcribing

Obtaining permission to conduct interviews took more time than could have been foreseen. When access was obtained interviews were conducted quite close together and quite close to the submission deadline for the dissertation. Each interview lasted over forty minutes and one interview transcribed came to 7,000 words. As a result the researcher decided from then to follow the directions of Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009),

‘Alternatives ways of reducing the time needed to transcribe audio-recording – Only transcribe those sections of each audio-recording that are pertinent to your research (data sampling)

#### Directions

- You will need to listen to the entire recording carefully first, at least twice
- You may miss certain things, meaning you will have to go back to the audio-recording later
- Those sections you transcribe will still require careful checking ’

#### 3.9 Coding

While all interviews were not transcribed some coding was achieved on those that were and this assisted in guiding the data sampling process. The approach to coding followed Gibbs’ (2007), ‘Thematic Coding and Categorizing’ Gibbs outlines twelve categories that he argues can be coded, the four relevant to this study are as follows

- 1) States – general conditions experienced by people or found in organisations
- 2) Meanings – a wide range of phenomena at the core of much qualitative analysis  
Meanings and interpretations are important parts of what directs participant actions
- 3) Participation – People’s involvement or adaptation to a setting
- 4) Conditions or constraints – the precursor to or cause of events or actions, things that restrict behaviour or actions

### 3.10 Ethics

While NCI currently do not have a code of ethics the research followed the standards required regarding plagiarism by referencing work external to the researchers and providing a comprehensive bibliography

Research ethics need serious consideration when human participants are the focus of empirical research (Biggam 2011) and were therefore guided by Biggam's (2011) core ethical principles of transparency, confidentiality, voluntarism, do no harm and impartiality. In order to address the principles of transparency and voluntarism the first page of the research guide provided an explanation of the purpose of the research, the nature and provisional length of the interview (see appendix 3). This was read out at the beginning of each interview. While the researcher aimed to omit the topic of the PC and the substantive agenda to prevent influencing interviewee disclosures it would have been bad ethical practice not to inform participants of the intended use of the findings (Biggam 2011). Also within this explanation it is set out that the interviewee is free to stop the interview at any time, refuse to answer certain questions or discuss certain topics. To address the principle of do no harm the researcher collected only details of the FFs length of service as disclosures about employment relations needed to be treated confidentially. To ensure participants anonymity only the most basic and necessary traits of the sample were sought. It is evident from the sampling section above that the rank of the target participants was FF. Two participants however, held higher positions, others had specific areas of expertise. These characteristics alongside the length of service of the particular interviewee could make them identifiable and so were omitted from the findings data.

Though the only avenue to access was through family and friends nine of the participants were complete strangers with one participant being the son of a friend of the researcher's family. The researcher had not met this participant for over twelve years and so any possible issues of bias were not present.

### 3.11 Limitations

Due to the difficulties in obtaining access, outlined above, two participants were unavoidable above the rank of FF. While this limited the scope of analysis, their interviews yielded interesting insights outlined in the findings section below.

Some participants were familiar with the concept of the PC and therefore at times pre-empted some of the questions. They also presented their answers within the framework of the PC which may have hindered the disclosure of other interesting variables that, in turn, could have led to interesting insights.

### 3.12 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that a qualitative approach in the shape of semi-structured interviews facilitates the collection of the necessary information required to explore the central proposition. The preceding chapter, chapter four, presents the information this methodology succeeded in capturing. The hurdles and challenges are also summarised.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **FINDINGS**

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## Chapter four - Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

As stated in the chapter three transcribing posed an insurmountable challenge and as a result a thorough coding process was not achievable. Nonetheless, the reoccurring themes were caught through the coding of earlier interviews and applying them while listening to each interview. This chapter presents these themes with extracts that correspond to them. Observations and summaries are supplied however the implications of the findings are discussed in the proceeding chapter, chapter five.

### 4.2 Themes

The presentation of the findings utilises the following main themes to allow for ease of understanding.

Themes,

- State of the psychological contract
- The meaning of the CPA
- The Impact of the CPA

However they are presented in

#### 4.2.1 State of the psychological contract

Perceptions of DCC's obligations to employees at the time of entering DFB very much reflected CIPD's (2005) description of traditional public sector jobs in the UK, job security, stability and generous pensions.

*'Yeah, I think I did because the people I knew already in the job, I knew their demeanour they really enjoyed it and they were there for life That was my expectation and still is' (interviewee four, 17 years in service)*

*'Yeah, it definitely would be the nature of the job but I'd say like a good chunk of it would have been job security as well like I mean you're guaranteed work, your guaranteed a job for thirty years, your guaranteed a career There are no other jobs that can do that like' (interviewee ten, 8 years in service)*

*'The main influence was probably family I'm third generation in my family My brothers are fire men and my dad was, and his dad was So it's always been talked about at home its just family, friends my dad's friends would have been in it So it has always been, since I can remember, it's always been there That's why I was drawn to it As well as the fact, at the time, it was you know, a pensionable job, its secure' (interviewee one, 6 years in service)*

*'In other words, you're going to get your thirty year career, you know and that is going to be sustained, in other words conditions you have been trained for, you're welfare is going to be looked after' (interviewee six, 27 years in service)*

It is evident from the responses that having family or friends who were previously in the service was a key influencer of FFs joining DFB Additionally the nature of the occupation and the variety of it enticed participants in

*'What interested me in join Dublin Fire Brigade was a couple of things, em, job security, pensionable job that whole aspect of it and then also the variety and also helping people' (interviewee seven, 17 years in service)*

Two FFs (interviewee four and interviewee five) joined the force not knowing what their starting salary was indicating their real inclination towards the nature of the job

Therefore training was also of significant obligation on the employer

*'I also thought about, that they offer a lot of opportunity for training in different facets of what we do, that's hugely valuable for me'* (interviewee four, 17 years service)

*'I suppose they would train ya and make ya, they have obviously eh they have things they have to do for me Provide me with a safe place to work, training em, provide me I suppose with counselling, pay me'* (interviewee six, 27 years in service)

The specific demands of the job, such as shift work, and the dangers associated with the occupation induced an emphasis on the basic standard of pay required to reflect those specific traits These are what employee's considered the basic obligation of their employer

*' obviously I expect my wage every week and a decent pay for what we do because I mean we are here 24/7, 365 days a year, Christmas Day, Easter, you name it we're here always, so I expect a fair wage for it'* (interviewee three, 28 years in service)

Perceptions of the FF's obligations towards DCC provided interesting responses

Without prompt a number of FFs asserted that they believed they had more than

fulfilled their obligations to the employer This provided interesting insights to consider

as intonations in these responses were, at times, a little defensive signalling a point of comparison to the employer's 'delivery of the deal'

*'They spent a lot of money training me so, I imagine, they want their bang for their buck and they paid me good wages over the years so, in other words, I think they deserve pay back as well So, I've done that in the sense that I haven't got a bad sick record, I don't believe in that, that is just a personal standard right, I absolutely obliged them'* (interviewee six, 12 years in service)

*'I've done a lot more than what was expected of me'* (interviewee five, 5 years in service)

*'Well I've been loyal to them I have I think they are getting value for money outta me, yeah for sure'* (interviewee three, 28 years in service)

#### 4 2 1 1 Summary

Pertinent to this research is the fact though some FFs only joined the service in the last eight years or less they still came to the job with the expectations of the relational components of job security and employee safety/training alongside the transactional component of a good pension and fair pay Employee safety and training also were additional relational components that were considered important obligations of DCC Most FFs felt that up until recently DCC in the main had fulfilled these early perceived obligations

#### 4.2.2 The meaning of Croke Park Agreement

The question related to the meaning of the CPA to the FF produced a variation corresponding with length of service. Those with longer service had a longer employment experience to compare this against.

*'It means the implementation of all the things that they've wanted to do for a number of years, while our pay is fixed until 2014 when they are going to reduce our pay again. That's basically what it means'* (interview seven, 17 years in service)

*'The Croke Park Agreement is like 'you guys are a drag on this country and we are going to get in and sort you out and if you don't do every last thing we say, we're going to use this agreement to take even more off you. We're threatening your pay. It never seems to come, for me you know as a fireman, what is your job actually worth'* (Interviewee five, 6 years' service)

The meaning for those with shorter lengths of service was less negative.

*'Less money. Well in fairness to it it has safe guarded things. It means stability for the next two years anyway so at least we knew, despite the fact we were getting cut, at least we knew what the cuts would be and we'll wait and see what happens afterwards'* (Interviewee nine, 8 years service)

The impact of the CPA on FFs followed this same trend as more junior FFs did not perceive there to be a significant impact on them as an employee nor a significant change in management's approach to employees.

*'It hasn't too much A small bit of restructuring but other than that we haven't really been effected by it' (interviewee seven, 12 years' in service )*

*'No I think it is quite similar Like I said about them being under pressure and that I think they are trying to do, threat people the same way but they are under pressure to push more and cut more and that you know But I don't think there is any intention to change the way people are treated' (Interviewee nine, 8 years service)*

#### 4 2 2 1 Summary

From the data presented and the trends the researcher found in the interviews it is fair to conclude from FFs responses to the meaning and impact of the CPA that two diverging trends are present It is also clear to observe that longer serving FFs were experiencing doubt about employer's priorities This has increased their concern for themselves and as a result FFs are thinking more short-term

#### 4 3 The impact of the Croke Park Agreement

FF with longer service with large mortgages and family responsibilities were experiencing a shift from relational loyalty to more transactional short-term outlook

*'If I have any more pay cuts I really don't know what I am going to do, to be honest So, I think in terms of pay cuts I couldn't manage particularly well on less' (interviewee four, 17 years in service)*

*' you're always thinking about what's around the corner, what could happen Like I'd contemplate all the time about getting out of this country and I'm not the only one A lot of the lads would There are lads here that went and come*

*back and there are lads that went and haven't come back But I certainly would be always thinking I wouldn't have thought of it before whereas now I'd be thinking very short-term, anything pops up you're looking at your options'*

(interviewee seven, 12 years in service)

*'There is a point for me in this job, and it's not far off, especially as an AP, where I'll say is it worth taking the risks for this job for the pay I'm getting'*

(interviewee five, 6 years in service)

#### 4.3.1 Morale

However, a knock on impact was evident as morale in the stations is low. Junior fire fighters, though not as significantly impacted by recent changes in pay and pension, were more than aware of the impact on their colleagues with families and mortgages. They observed the impact of this on attitudes and behaviour in the stations:

*'Possibly, and possibly around the station you might get a bit of you know when we're not on call there are station duties to be done and there are drills to be done, training, equipment, new pieces of equipment. And then station routine would be cleaning, sweeping, mopping floors, cleaning the kitchen all that kinda stuff. That end of it, I would probably say people are not interested in it anymore as they used to. But once the bell goes and out the gate it's a 110%. I can't see that ever dropping, you would never not try, once there is a real emergency or a real turn out, there never a difference there'*

(Interviewee one, 6 years in service)

*'I think it's got slightly better now because people you know you get used to it and you adjust to how it was. But for a few years in here I did notice it,*



*people's attitudes changed For the first time ever people weren't entirely happy like on a day to day basis we all love coming in here, almost everyone loves this job, but for a while there, now it's to do with what was going on there outside as well but people weren't happy with the way things were being done, they weren't happy coming in You could sense it in the place People weren't as happy as they were previous you know You could sense that it wasn't just because of more pressure at home or less money It was because they weren't happy with the way things were being changed Even the way when things are being cut its kinda they came down to ya and go 'this is changing this is being done, from tomorrow it's like this' if we were told and we were talked with and that people would be a bit happier you know and reason it out like 'this is why it's being done' (interviewee nine, 8 years in service)*

#### 4 3 2 Towards 2014

FFs felt that they had the organisations best interests at heart The way cost reductions were being sought and changes implemented in the workplace was considered to lack acknowledgement of this and to be putting their safety and the safety of the public at risk This was impacting levels of trust and creating fear about 2014

*'A slowdown, an absolute slowdown in courses being offered to us A serious drop in morale, and obviously wages and potential lies being told to us, I suppose, whether they filter down to us from the top, from D C C Obviously regarding wages and money and stuff like that being told if we do X Y and Z in 2014 when it finishes then we'll be grand, all your wages will be fine, whereas*

*the fact is the money isn't there to sustain the wages or whatever it is at the minute so instead of saying where we are at its been fed as if everything is fine and dandy' (interviewee ten, 4 years in service)*

*'It's definitely impacted us as people think of a ticking time bomb going off as were getting to 2014 What's going to happen then? And it's created a lot of insecurity in relation to a lot of our wages because a lot of our wages are made up of shift allowance In other words if they start messing with your allowances, your wages, you'd end up getting more on the labour, you know' (interviewee six, 27 years in service)*

*'There's still talks of God knows it's always hanging there looming around that there could be more cuts coming and that, you know There's always a rumour here and there' (interviewee two, 4years in service)*

FFs expressed their disappointment in the lack of or avoidance of their participation with regards how changes related to cost reduction were exercised

*'Oh drastic changes now Everything is now down to money, you know' (Interviewee three, 28 years' service)*

*'That's back to Croke Park, that's what I feel, they've just taken a cut here to save this money and a cut there to save that money, and they haven't looked into I don't think they've asked We could give them savings in the morning, if they came in properly and asked, you could give them savings but they seem to be trying to take them from the wrong places' (Interviewee seven, 17 years in service )*

*' you notice the cut backs, definitely notice the cut backs in work We are it feels like on a daily basis we are doing more to cover the cut backs Now, being realistic that is the way things are at the moment, you have to kinda except that but it does seem to us that they could cut things in different ways, you know, if they thought about it better, they could cut things in different ways You know talk to us and see what ways we think they could alter things There are some silly things that they have done that for cut backs where, you go 'why didn't you that instead they could have saved the same amount of money, that wouldn't effect either us or the service we provide', you know' (interviewee nine, 8years in service)*

FFs pointed out that, while they were receiving less, they were doing more and can't take their holidays they are due as a result of low staff numbers This impacted their perception of fairness and their delivery of their side of the deal

*'We're doing a hell of a lot more on the public aspect of it you're probably doing the same amount, as regards your turn out wise drills wise, different things around the station, school visits, pre fire planning all the likes of that we're doing loads more of that stuff' (Interviewee seven 17 years service)*

*' there's things like em a personal problem I would have if I'm owed leave that's compensatory, basically we'd work more than 39 hours a week, so rather than giving us extra money for the hours over, it adds up over the course of a year and you're given time back in lieu for that So, I'm owed leave and it comes to the point of when you try to apply for the leave and because of the*

*cuts and the recruitment embargo and all that there's not enough people in the job because the numbers are down so much, you can't take your leave because it puts the numbers down even more. So you're owed leave but you can't take it'*

(Interviewee one, 6 years in service)

### 4.3.3 Training

Training cuts impacted on the FF's perceptions of the DCC's 'delivery of the deal' to equip them to do the aspect of the job they are most motivated to do and created uncertainty and in turn distrust about the Department of Environment's priorities

*'The thing is you have to keep fighting to keep our standards up, I mean they are looking at everything now, every single thing we do because everything we do has to have training involved and training costs money so the nature of the job is we are non-productive so everything we do is a cost'* (interviewee three, 28 years in service)

*'Obviously with cut backs em different levies applying to us and stuff like that, you kinda off, you feel now, you know everyone's morale is gone down cause there is no there is very little training and your and then obviously then you re not really fit for the job your doing because of they have a let down on their side because they say they have no money to train ya'* (Interviewee six, 27 years in service)

#### 4.3.4 Rumour mill

This evident distrust is perpetuated further through an internal rumour mill

*‘ and I think one of our biggest other problems I think it is the uncertainty a lot of people like certainty and I think that is gone’ (interviewee four, 17 years in service)*

*‘The rumour mill in the fire brigade, the rumour mill is rife I mean if you were in here some of the stuff you hear is just so you wouldn’t know where it is coming down from’ (interviewee ten, 8 years in service)*

*‘So, as I say, there are aspects of the Croke Park Agreement I don’t agree with but I have to I’m in it because it is protecting my wages and my employment so I can’t be sacked You know what I mean, so there is good and bad Management, they don’t like it but we have what we have but what really is going to be the problem is in 2014 when it runs out Then they can run amuck unless there is something else in place, you know’ (interviewee three, 28 year in service)*

Presented so far has been the main relevant trends that arose from the interviews

However, in order to give the data collected justice the following variations are included

All participants loved their job and all participants had an appreciation for the economic position their employer, DCC, was in Longer serving FFs made clear their dislike however of the previous Governments dichotomy of the workers into public sector or private sector employees

One station officer expressed his on-going concern for the mental health of his employees, especially those with financial difficulties

FFs revealed that equipment was taking longer to get replaced and vehicles that should be off the road continue to be used

Others explained that management had obtained, through the CPA, a six week period during which they can implement a change if it has been rejected through official negotiating channels. Unions can only then take the issue to the Labour Relations Commission

#### 4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the main findings of the semi-structured interviews within a framework associated with the themes required to explore the central proposition. The following chapter discusses the importance of these findings and their implications

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DICUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

## 5.1 Introduction

It is not possible to draw generalisations from this research about fire fighters (FF) employment relationship in Dublin Fire Brigade (DFB). However, certain trends have become evident from the data collected from participating FFs that is signalled in the literature review.

## 5.2 Discussion of the findings

In order to provide structure to the findings set out in the previous chapter, the three themes drawn from the central question set out in the research methodology will be used,

- (i) The state of the psychological contract
- (ii) Substantive agenda
- (iii) Evidence of transactional shift

## 5.3 The state of the psychological contract

As per the literature review, Guest considered the state of the PC to be based on the other parties: 1) delivery of the deal, 2) fairness of the deal, 3) trust that it will be continued to be delivered in the future. Therefore, the discussion begins by exploring how FF experienced their employer's 'delivery of the deal'.

### 5.3.1 Delivery of the deal

In order to explore the 'delivery of the deal', a point of orientation was sought. This was done by first exploring what influenced FFs to join DFB and the obligations they perceived their employer to have towards them at this time. The data shows that



regardless of length of service all participants came into the force with the perception that it was a job for life and would supply a good pension. This is in line with CIPD's (2005) observation about the traditional expectations linked to public service jobs. Up until the Croke Park Agreement (CPA) DCC was considered to be meeting employee's expectations.

The findings show however that the meaning of the CPA, for longer serving FFs, signalled a shift in the employer's 'delivery of the deal' of the transactional components of pay, pension and allowances. This in turn impacted the relational component of loyalty whereby these longer serving FFs were now thinking more short-term and considering alternative employment options. This therefore holds as an evident shift from a relational to transactional contract as a result of the CPA. The consequent impact on attitude and behaviours, in the shape of low morale and less interest in the more menial duties, is in line with found Rousseau and Robinson (1994) findings. The findings show also a secondary impact of low morale experienced by longer serving FFs further impacted on the level of morale experienced those with less service.

FF's early perceptions of the employer's obligation towards them also included the provision of a safe place to work. However, in answers about post the CPA, FFs revealed that this part of the deal was not being delivered as they expected due to cost reductions. Training had been curtailed and equipment not replaced. The findings show that this perceived failure to deliver on the part of The Government's and DCC's, as a result of prioritising cost reduction over safety, has been experienced as a breach of the PC. This has impacted on employee's trust in their employer as predicted by Harrison and Kessels' (2004).

Beardwell & Claydon (2007) predict that poor PCs tend to lower employee commitment and reduce performance. However, the findings reveal that the nature of the job, which served as a strong influence on FFs to join the service, offset the predicted impact of the breach of the PC in relation to duties in emergency response. There was evidence, however, of Beardwell & Claydon (2007)'s other prediction of 'turn over' in so far as FFs were leaving which FFs themselves said was not usual for the organisation.

### 5.3.2 Fairness of the deal

The FFs were motivated and believed they are delivering their side of the deal by being eager to learn, having low absenteeism and being loyal. FFs were aware of the financial limitations DCC were experiencing and expressed their acceptance of these. The findings reveal however, that how the cuts were being sought and implemented was not considered fair. For example the inclination towards the nature of the job, emergency response, very much carried throughout FF's career. This resulted training being highly valued and sought after, with its ability to equip FFs to respond better to emergencies. Therefore, there was a perceived breach of the fairness of the deal, a relational component, employer to provide training, a component of the relational contract.

### 5.3.3 Trust that it will be continued to be delivered in the future

As is exposed in the findings 2014 poses as a big threat to FFs which signals a lack of trust in DCC's priorities.

## 5.4 Substantive agenda

The meaning of the CPA varied along two lines corresponding again with the length of service of the FF in line with Edwards & Whitston (1991) observation, outlined in the

literature review. The longer serving FFs, who had seen previous attempts of implementation of changes to policies and procedures or terms and conditions of employment contained in the CPA, saw it as the implementation mechanism of a management agenda originating from the Department of the Environment. While the CPA was done in consultation and agreement with the representative unions the sudden onset of national austerity is considered an opportunity, taken by the Government, to force through desired change. More Junior FFs did not express such strong opinions about the implications of the CPA for them as individuals. However, they did acknowledge it was less pay. Demuse, Bergmann and Lester's (2001) assertion that newest generation of workers may favour high compensation and highly flexible work is neither directly transferable to an occupation such as that of FFs nor a part of the new deal under the CPA.

The majority of FFs felt the way change was being driven, approached and implemented, up to this time, indicated that cost reductions were priority over employee consultation and welfare. Increased workload reflected sustained contributions. Lack of consultation also reflects Walton et al's (2000) assertion about management's new social contract based on enforcing labour compliance, as outlined in the literature review with reference to the substantive agenda.

While these approaches to negotiations, employment relations and management all reflect the Walton et al's (2000) managerial agenda it is not within this research's capacity to confirm this is being actively chosen. Nonetheless, there is no question whether intentional or not, the impact the current approaches, both to negotiations and change, are inducing breached, vulnerable and in some cases negative PCs for the fire fighters interviewed for this research. The evident uncertainty and concern about what

will happen in 2014, the rumour mill and the breach for longer serving FFs outlined above all point towards a lack of trust in DCC and the

### 5.5 Transactional shift

In order to see if there was a shift in the PC this research looked first at the perceived state of it. This provided important comparative information when considering how fire fighters perceived the impact of CPA. The state of the PC was found to vary depending on the length of service of the fire fighter. It is apparent from the findings that longer serving FFs had experienced a violation in their relational PC, in line with Beardwell & Claydon's (2007) observations laid out in the literature review. They had a longer experience of employment relations from which to compare the content and approach to CPA by their employer. This had resulted in a shift from long-term relational components of loyalty to a short-term transactional components of financial concern.

However, the literature pertaining to relational and transactional contracts assumes the shift, is somewhat deliberate. This is not necessarily the case for these FFs. As one FF pointed out, in the findings chapter above, FF do not leave the service easily. It was more a case of the viability of the occupation on a fulltime basis being unrealistic for those with financial and family responsibilities. This is not catered for in the theory associated with the psychological contract.

The more tangible transactional economic components of the exchange relationship with the employer, in the shape of cost reducing pay cuts and an increased pension levy, has impacted more significantly on the PC of more longer serving FFs.

## 5.6 Reflections

As this research was predominantly concerned with the impact of the CPA and its impact on FFS in Dublin Fire Brigade it was likely that questions into employee relations and the state of the psychological contract would draw out more negative aspects. In order to paint as holistic a picture as possible it is imperative to outline the attributes that would point towards a positive psychological contract that arose during this exploration which were significant in weight. The motivation that brought fire fighters into the service is very much cultivated by DFB through the strong family like culture that is caring and supportive in nature. This bond contributes significantly to maintaining mental health evident in this study through their awareness of the financial difficulties some of their colleagues were in. All the fire fighters that the researcher encountered loved their job.

## 5.7 Conclusion

This research has successfully utilised the conceptual framework of the PC as an analytical tool to explore FFs in DFB. The inclusion of the relevant theory from Walton et al's (2000) Strategic Negotiations enhanced the framework's capacity to explore broader issues affecting FFs. However, this was a micro project with limitations of time, access and scope. While the trends in the findings were strong they require further exploration to enable broader generalisations to be made.

However, this micro research finds that the correlation between the CPA and a shift of emphasis onto the more transactional components of the PC was most certainly evident for some FFs but not for all. It further finds that FFs have experienced a breach of their PC which has resulted in a serious lack of trust in management. The CPA signalled a shift in employer's priorities reflected in a new drive for cost reductions. This coupled with FFs complaints of lack of consultation in cost reduction strategies and the implementation of change show signs of the management's avoidance of these approaches in favour of forcing change through. This has further negatively impacted on the state of the PC but not resulted in a shift to the more transactional components.

The strong family like culture within Dublin Fire Brigade and fire fighters' strong motivation towards the work they do provides some balance against this but fear about 2014 poses a big threat to it.

2

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A: Information sheet for interviewees

**Semi-structured interview**

**Name:** Veronica Brady

**Student number:** 11103728

**Contact information:** Mobile: 086 8621676 E-mail [bonnie.brady@hotmail.com](mailto:bonnie.brady@hotmail.com)

**Project content**

This interview is part of my research for completion of my thesis which is required for completion of masters in human resource management.  
*'What impact has the adoption of the private sector substantive agenda by the public sector reform agenda had on the relational and transactional psychological contracts for fire fighters in Dublin Fire Brigade?'*

**I agree to participate in this interview, whose conditions are as follows:**

- **The project is aimed at obtaining subjective experiences of the psychological contract. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key informants**
- **Interviews will last no longer than half an hour and questions will deal with expectations, motivation, trust, ideology, commitment and breaches of the psychological contract**
- **The interview I give and the information it contains will be used solely for the purposes defined by the project**
- **At any time, I can refuse to answer certain questions, discuss certain topics or even put an end to the interview without prejudice to myself**
- **If I consent the interview will be recorded to facilitate the interviewer's job. However, the recording will be destroyed as soon as it has been transcribed.**
- **All interview data will be handled so as to protect their confidentiality. Therefore, no names will be mentioned and the information will be coded.**

- **All data will be destroyed at the end of the project**
- **For any information about the project, I can contact the interviewer's supervisor Colin Whitston on 01 448630**



## APPENDIX TWO: Semi-structure interview guide

Main questions	Additional questions	Topics covered	Link to objectives
<i>1. Can you tell me about what influenced you to join Dublin City Fire Brigade and what part of the occupation you are most passionate about?</i>		Primary motivator and possibly expectations before entering the force	ice breaker, identify motivators, see further on if these motivators have changed, been challenged, inducing positive/negative behaviours that could be developed
<i>2. What obligations did you believe your employer had towards you as an employee at the time and have these changed since then?</i>	a) Have they fulfilled those obligations? b) If they have changed, how and why?	<i>state of PC, change in PC,</i>	2. Identify and classify obligations into transactional/relational and explore if their priorities/concerns or changes perceived resemble a shift from relational to transactional contract
<i>3. What obligations did you believe your employer considered you to have towards them at the time and have these changed since then?</i>	a) Have you fulfilled those obligations? (i) are you fulfilling them still? b) If they have changed how and why?		3. Identify and classify obligations into relational/transactional and explore perceptions of employer's priorities/concern when managing employees, communication, change, any shift from a relational to transactional contract a) attitudes and behaviours, relational and transactional
<i>4. What does the Croke Park Agreement mean to you?</i>	a) If any of the three substantive agenda priorities arise – follow with how has that element impacted your relationship with your employer?		4. (i) Establish awareness of topic and avoid leading questions (ii) Observe if elements of three substantive agenda priorities arise (a) if they arise are they linked to shift from transactional to relational contract
<i>5. How has the Croke Park Agreement impacted on you as an employee?</i>	a) How have these impacted on your attitudes and behaviours in and towards your		5. (i) Explore if any of the three elements of substantive agenda are brought up. Explore before and

	work/organisation?		after relational/transactional impacts (11) Explore if there is an acceptance of financial constraints on employer, evidence of loyalty, trust, fears about changes, have obligations increased, decreased a) Explore impact on attitudes and behaviours
<b>6</b> <i>Do you perceive changes in your employer's approach to managing employees?</i>	a) How would you explain those changes?		<b>6</b> Explore if any of the three substantive agenda priorities arise a) If there are any relational/transactional contract shifts, changes, implications
<b>7</b> <i>Do you believe your loyalty and trust have been affected at all as a result of the Croke Park Agreement?</i>			
<b>8</b> <i>Is this occupation still a viable long-term one?</i>	a) Why/Why not?		<b>8</b> Explore if there an issue of job security (relational) or viability issue (transactional) comparing it to what influenced fire fighter to join force and what might be impeding him/her to stay or making them stay despite changes a) Explore motivations, compare this to question one and see if accommodations are being made in order to stay in the occupation
<b>9</b> <i>What could your employer do to induce positive attitudes and behaviours in you as an employee at this time of financial austerity?</i>			<b>7)</b> Explore if employees favour more transactional/relational elements