

A CASE STUDY OF CAPITAL BUDGETING PROCESS IN THE IRISH PUBLIC SECTOR: METRO NORTH AND THE PARLIAMENTARY AGENDA

Mr Desmond Gibney
Lecturer in Accounting, National College of Ireland and
PhD candidate, Manchester Business School, University of Manchester

Abstract

Metro North was the largest infrastructure project in Irish history, and if the project had proceeded, it would have been one of the largest public private partnership (PPP) projects in Europe. How much consideration was given in Irish parliamentary debates to the Metro North PPP rail project? Did parliamentary discussion of Metro North consider political themes, such as efficiency, risk and accountability, which have been regarded as being neglected in the literature on PPPs? Was there a discussion of a key issue for the public sector, namely value for money (VFM)? Does an analysis of parliamentary debates provide support for use of the 'agendas and alternatives' framework developed by John W. Kingdon?

This paper is part of a wider research study of the practice of public sector capital budgeting in Ireland from a management accounting perspective, by means of a case study of the Metro North project. The study aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by examining the *process*, rather than the *financial calculations*, involved in capital budgeting.

Parliamentary debates between 2000 and 2009 are analysed in order to determine the extent to which Metro North featured in the discourse of legislators. The deterioration of Ireland's public finances and reaction of bond markets, led to the eventual deferral of Metro North in November 2011.

The theoretical framework used is the 'agendas and alternatives' framework developed by John W Kingdon in his study of healthcare policy and transportation policy in the United States, where the term 'agenda' refers to the list of items to which serious attention is being paid at any point in time and the term 'alternative' refers to items not on the agenda but which could be seriously considered.

Keywords:

Capital budgeting; Public private partnership (PPP); Irish public sector; Rail projects; Metro North; Agendas & alternatives; John W. Kingdon.

1: Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to study the Metro North rail project in the context of Irish public sector capital budgeting, using the 'agendas and alternatives' framework developed by John W. Kingdon [1]. This study draws on an analysis of documentation gathered in the course of a longitudinal study of the Metro North project, as well as an analysis of parliamentary debates. The study aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by examining the *process*, rather than the *financial calculations*, involved in capital budgeting. The Metro North project had a price tag of approximately €3 billion, to be financed by means of a public private partnership (PPP).

The paper is organised as follows. **Section 2** introduces the 'agendas and alternatives' framework, which is part of the policy agenda stream of political theory, and examines some applications of this framework. **Section 3** describes the Metro North project, and its importance as a key infrastructure project. This section also discusses the applicability of Kingdon's theoretical framework to a study of Metro North. **Section 4** contains an analysis of parliamentary debates, in order to see to what extent the 'agendas and alternatives' framework can be applied to Metro North. This section also reviews some studies of parliamentary debates from different jurisdictions. Finally, the paper concludes in **Section 5** with a summary and highlights the next steps for this research.

2: Theoretical framework of 'agendas and alternatives'

The theoretical framework used for this research, the 'agendas and alternatives' framework, was used by John W. Kingdon in his study of healthcare and transportation policy in the United States [1]. Kingdon wants to understand "why things happen the way they do in entities like the federal government" [2], pp. 331. Kingdon has written an updated second edition which contains an epilogue about healthcare reform in the Clinton and Obama administrations [3]. The framework of Kingdon has been categorised as falling within the literature of political theory, and further categorised within a stream of policy agenda literature [4]. Kingdon used a revised version of the 'garbage can' model [5]. According to authors who used Kingdon's framework as well as other frameworks for a study of the economic and public sector reforms undertaken in New Zealand, "for Kingdon, as for more classic garbage can theorists, governments are organized anarchies, but Kingdon puts a greater emphasis on the organized part of the formulation" [6], pp. 413.

Reference [1] looked at how certain proposals were considered by government and how certain other proposals were not considered, and concentrated on two aspects of the public policy making process, namely "the setting of the agenda" and "the specification of alternatives from which a choice is to be made" [1], pp. 3. The term 'agenda' refers to the list of items to which serious attention is being paid at any point in time, while the term 'alternative' refers to items not on the agenda but which could be seriously considered.

The policy making process consists of three streams: "problem recognition, formation and refining of policy proposals, and politics" [1], pp. 92. Each of these three processes can serve as an impetus or as a constraint. The streams are "coupled at critical junctures, and that coupling produces the greatest agenda change" [1], pp. 92. The coupling occurs when "a problem is recognized, a solution is available, the political climate makes the time right for change, and the constraints do not prohibit action. Advocates develop their proposals and then wait for problems to come along to which they can attach their solutions." [1], pp. 93-94.

According to [4], a good example of the use of this stream of literature is a study of Australian public sector financial reporting policy [7]. The use of Kingdon's theoretical framework by [7] can be summarised as having three phases of policy formulation (issue creation, issue expansion and policy response) and two types of agenda (political agenda and policy agenda). The agenda-setting framework has the advantage of providing structure to "an otherwise disparate set of institutions, operating practices and actors in the policy process" [7], pp. 521.

3: Metro North

A metro system for Dublin was supported by the Dublin Transportation Office (DTO) in the 'Platform for Change' integrated transport strategy for the Dublin region [8, 9]. A metro system was defined as a light rail system that is completely segregated along its alignment [9]. It was envisaged that a metro system would 'have a spine from Swords to Shanganagh. This line will run via Dublin Airport, Finglas, Broadstone, the city centre, Ranelagh, Sandyford and Cherrywood' [9], pp. 57.

Metro North is the name given to part of the original proposed network, and it consists of plans to provide a rail link from Dublin city centre to north Dublin, including the airport and the town of Swords. The project was intended to be financed by PPP. Metro North was promoted by a State-owned agency called the Railway Procurement Agency (RPA). **Table 1** contains a chronology of the key dates in Metro North. Fingal County Council, whose administrative area includes the airport and Swords, lobbied for Metro North and highlighted the fact that Dublin is the only capital city in Western Europe whose airport is not served by metro or rail [10]. The government published a capital investment plan called Transport 21 in November 2005 [11]. This was an early example of multi-year capital budgeting in the Irish public sector. The government prepared three subsequent multi-year capital budgets up to 2011 [12, 13, 14]. The Metro North PPP was first advertised in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) in March 2007 [15].

Table 1: Chronology of Metro North project

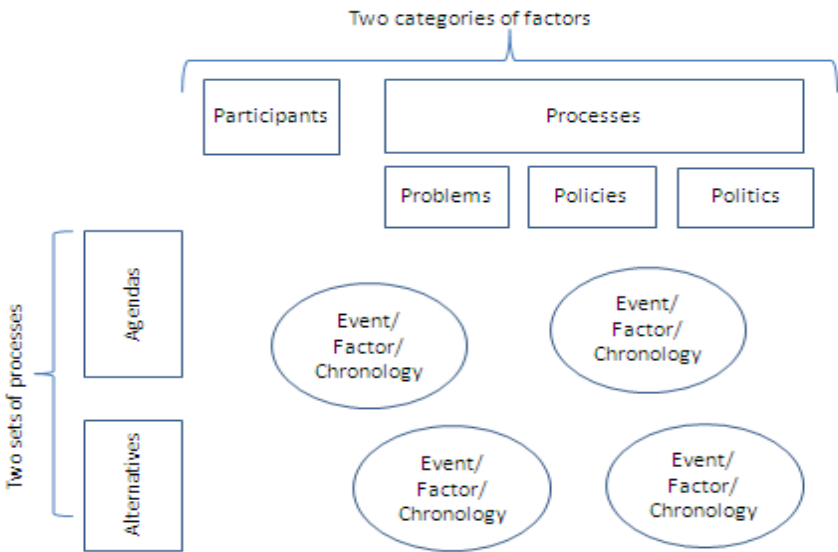
Date	Event in the chronology of Metro North project
1991 to 1994	Dublin Transportation Initiative (DTI) worked on a transport strategy for Dublin.
1995	Dublin Transportation Office (DTO) established to develop integrated transport strategy for Dublin.
September 2000	DTO publishes an outline strategy document called 'A Platform for Change', which includes a metro network.
November 2001	DTO publishes a final strategy document called 'A Platform for Change', which includes a metro network.
2001	Railway Procurement Agency (RPA) established as a statutory agency to deliver light rail and metro infrastructure.
November 2002	RPA submits Outline Business Case for a metro. Government considers the timeframe is too long and cost is too expensive.
February 2003	RPA makes a presentation to a cabinet sub-committee.
June 2003	RPA submits a revised proposal for metro to government, for a line from city centre to airport with option to extend line to Swords. Government considers the timeframe is still too long.
October 2003	RPA submits further options to government.
Early 2004	RPA formally 'stand down' the metro project team.
February 2005	'MetroNorth: A Link to the Future' is published by local councils, airport and RPA.
November 2005	Government publishes 'Transport 21', a plan for €34 billion of capital investment for the years 2006 to 2015, of which €8 billion is to be financed by PPP. The metro proposal is now rebranded as Metro North, for a line from city centre to airport and Swords, and identified as a "main objective".
2006	RPA commenced process of assessing alternative route alignments.
March 2007	Procurement process started for PPP. Metro North is advertised in Official Journal of European Union (OJEU).
November 2007	Four consortia prequalified for invitation to tender.
May 2008	Tender documentation issued to four consortia.
September 2008	Application made for Railway Order.
June 2009	Two consortia selected to proceed to final stage of procurement.
May 2010	European Investment Bank approves loan up to €500 million for Metro North.
July 2010	RPA submit Detailed Business Case for Metro North.
July 2010	Government announces results of review of capital expenditure and publishes 'Infrastructure Investment Priorities' for the years 2010 to 2016. Metro North is described as a "key project".
October 2010	Railway Order granted, subject to conditions.
November 2010	Bailout of Irish economy by European Union / International Monetary Fund / European Central Bank. Government publishes 'National Recovery Plan' for capital investment for the years 2011 to 2014. Metro North is described as a "key objective".
April 2011	Review of capital expenditure announced by new government. All capital projects, including Metro North, to be reviewed.
November 2011	Government publishes 'Infrastructure and Capital Investment', a new plan for the years 2012 to 2016. Metro North remains a "key element" but is deferred and will be reviewed in 2015.

The deterioration of Ireland’s public finances and reaction of bond markets culminated in a bailout by a ‘troika’ of the International Monetary Fund / European Central Bank / European Union in November 2010. After an early general election in February 2011, a new government took office in March 2011 and the new transport minister expressed a clear wish for at least one major rail project to proceed [16]. The new government carried out a review of capital expenditure for the period up to 2016, and announced the result of the review in November 2011 [14]. The conclusion was that the funds available for public transport would be insufficient to meet the government’s portion of Metro North’s PPP costs, and ‘a commitment from the State to fully fund the project if the PPP process should ultimately fail would be required’, but ‘could not be given in the current circumstances’ [17], pp. 12. When announcing the deferral of Metro North on 10th November 2011, the transport minister emphasised that the decision would be reviewed again in 2015 [18].

The importance of Metro North can be gauged by three factors. Firstly, its estimated cost of €3 billion meant that it would have ranked as one of the largest PPP projects in Europe. By way of comparison, according to the European PPP Expertise Centre (EPEC), the Tours-Bordeaux high-speed railway in France had a private sector capital component of approximately €3 billion, and this was described as one of the largest-ever PPP projects in Europe [19]. Secondly, a briefing document prepared for the new government in 2011 described Metro North as ‘the largest infrastructure project in the history of the State and easily the most expensive’ [20], pp. 140. Thirdly, in December 2011, the taoiseach (prime minister) made a televised address to the nation in advance of the annual budget being presented to parliament and singled out one capital expenditure project (Metro North) for special mention by saying that the government ‘had to postpone some really good projects – like Metro North, for example’ [21].

The applicability of Kingdon’s theoretical framework for this research can be summarised in a matrix approach, outlined in **Figure 1**, whereby the key stages in the life of the Metro North project from **Table 1** can be mapped to various factors from the PPP literature, to show how these factors influenced the initial decision to proceed with Metro North as a PPP, and then to follow those elements over the duration of the project up to the date of its deferral in 2011. Examples of such factors could be the five themes used to highlight political issues with PPP, namely efficiency, risk, complexity, accountability and governance [22], or value for money (VFM) as being a key issue for the public sector [23].

Figure 1: Possible use of Kingdon’s framework for capital budgeting of Metro North



4: Analysis of parliamentary debates

One aspect of the agenda-setting process, namely an analysis of parliamentary debates, has been examined in this research because of the importance attached by Kingdon to elected officials. "If any one set of participants in the policy process is important in the shaping of the agenda, it is elected officials and their appointees, rather than career bureaucrats or nongovernmental actors" [3], pp. 19. Also, a review of PPP research highlighted a commonly-held view that PPP "must be understood within a broader social and political context" [24], pp. 906. The parliament of Ireland is called the Oireachtas, and contains two houses: a House of Representatives called Dáil Eireann (usually shortened to Dáil) and a Senate called Seanad Eireann (usually shortened to Seanad). The Dáil is directly-elected by members of the public, whereas the Seanad is not directly-elected. The government must retain the confidence of the Dáil, or else a new government is formed or a general election is called. Government ministers are almost always drawn from the ranks of the Dáil, although there is a provision to allow two members of the Seanad to be appointed as ministers. Financial legislation can only be initiated in the Dáil. The search of parliamentary debates was limited to Dáil debates for the purposes of this research, because of the primacy of the Dáil in relation to the Seanad.

Other examples of studies that have examined parliamentary debates [25, 26] were confined to one type of parliamentary procedure. Reference [25] carried out an analysis of all of the speeches in a confidence debate on a coalition government in Ireland in 1991, in order to identify each speaker as being pro- or anti-government on the basis of the language used. Reference [25] use word-scoring, a technique that had previously been applied to studies of party manifestos - they use reference texts as a comparison to parliamentary speeches. Reference [26] looked at the Canadian parliament's Question Period between 1988 and 1999, which is similar to Question Time in the Dáil. Most of the questions in the Canadian parliament are asked by opposition parties, and consequently have an indirect link with policy, but they provide evidence of the symbolic aspects of politics. Reference [26] coded the data to arrive at an analysis of what issues occupied the greatest amount of time in Question Period, and then compared the results to a series of quarterly public opinion surveys. Unlike other studies [25, 26], this search of Dáil debates covers a much wider range of parliamentary procedures than Question Time or a confidence debate, because it also includes debates on new legislation and on topical issues.

The main website for official information about the Oireachtas is <http://www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/> and it has a search facility but results are presented in blocks of 10 items, and there is no indication given of the total number of items found to match the search. An alternative resource <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/> contains the full text of all Dáil and Seanad debates up to July 2009, but it is no longer being updated. The historical debates website was used because it allowed a more flexible search, such as by date, keyword in text, name of speaker etc.

Twenty-two separate searches of Dáil debates between 1st September 2000 and 30th July 2009 were carried out, and the searches are listed in **Table 2**. The searches used various combinations of the words 'metro', 'PPP' and some key features of PPP. The start date of 1st September 2000 was chosen to coincide with the month of publication of [8]. The end date of 30th July 2009 was chosen because two consortia had been selected for the final stage of PPP procurement for Metro North by that date, and in addition the Dáil historical debates website ceased to be updated. The initial search was for all instances of the term *metro* (search 1), and this search was refined to include specific reference to *rail* (search 8). The smaller number of results for the term *metro north* (search 2) was not surprising because the Metro North name only gained wide usage after publication of [10]. The majority of the other searches therefore concentrated on using the term *metro* rather than *metro north*. Combinations of search words were used to capture reference to *metro* and *public private partnership* (searches 3, 4 and 6), with broadly similar results. Likewise, combinations of search words were used to capture reference to *metro* and *rail* and *public private partnership* (searches 9 and 10), with broadly similar results. However, there were differences when combinations of search words were used to capture reference to *metro north* and *public private partnership* (searches 5 and 7).

The next step was to link occurrence of the terms *ppp* and *metro* and *rail* in the parliamentary debates to two aspects of PPP literature. Firstly, five themes identified [22] were used as search items. These five themes were used as a framework to highlight political issues in the UK that have been neglected in wider PPP literature [22]. These five themes are *efficiency* (searches 11 and 12), *risk* (searches 13 and 14), *complexity* (searches 15 and 16), *accountability* (searches 17 and 18) and *governance* (searches 19 and 20). Secondly, *value for money* (searches 21 and 22) was identified as being a key management accounting issue in the public sector [23]. The requirement to consider VFM in public sector adds complexity to what would otherwise be straightforward capital investment appraisal techniques [23].

Table 2: Search results from Dáil debates between September 2000 and July 2009

Ref.	Search terms	Documents found
1	Metro	685
2	'metro north'	194
3	metro AND ppp	123
4	metro AND public ADJ private ADJ partnership	122
5	'metro north' AND ppp	43
6	metro AND 'public private partnership'	122
7	'metro north' AND 'public private partnership'	26
8	metro AND rail	492
9	metro AND rail AND ppp	103
10	metro AND rail AND 'public private partnership'	100
11	metro AND rail AND 'public private partnership' AND efficiency	24
12	metro AND rail AND ppp AND efficiency	24
13	metro AND rail AND 'public private partnership' AND risk	41
14	metro AND rail AND ppp AND risk	37
15	metro AND rail AND 'public private partnership' AND complexity	5
16	metro AND rail AND ppp AND complexity	6
17	metro AND rail AND 'public private partnership' AND accountability	24
18	metro AND rail AND ppp AND accountability	27
19	metro AND rail AND 'public private partnership' AND governance	14
20	metro AND rail AND ppp AND governance	14
21	metro AND rail AND 'public private partnership' AND 'value for money'	38
22	metro AND rail AND ppp AND 'value for money'	41

The results shown in **Table 2** indicate that when the terms *metro*, *rail* and *PPP* featured in Dáil debates, the order of frequency for occurrence of the six features identified in the PPP literature (starting with the most frequent) was as follows: VFM (searches 21 and 22), risk (searches 13 and 14), accountability (searches 17 and 18), efficiency (searches 11 and 12), governance (searches 19 and 20), and complexity (searches 15 and 16). A further analysis of the parliamentary debate search results was undertaken, initially for two searches (searches 9 and 10), to examine in more detail the context for Dáil discussion of the terms *metro*, *rail* and *PPP*. The first stage of the analysis was to determine the number of times the three terms occurred in the record of Dáil debates. When the 203 documents (103 from search 9 and 100 from search 10) were examined, 57 documents were found to appear in results for both searches, meaning that overall there were 146 documents that required further study. The second stage of the analysis was to show the timeframe for these 146 documents, and **Table 3** shows results mapped to the chronology from **Table 1**.

The results from **Table 3** show that on a time-apportioned basis, the search terms *metro*, *rail* and *PPP* occurred most frequently (ten times in a four-month period) in the Dáil in 2000. This coincided with the first major impetus for the metro project through the publication of the 'Platform for Change' policy document [8]. Apart from the seven-month period in 2009 when these terms received no mention in the Dáil, the next-lowest number of mentions was in 2005 (ten times in a twelve-month period). This coincided with launch of a document lobbying for the project [10] and launch of Transport 21 [11].

One disadvantage of studying the Dáil debates is that the verbatim record of proceedings also contain “knockabout elements” [25], pp. 65-66), such as “interruptions, insults, general melee, interventions from the chair, members occasionally being ejected for disorderly behaviour, points of order and procedure, and so on” [25], pp. 65. Another disadvantage is the sheer volume of records. For example, the 146 documents resulting from searches 9 and 10 generated over one million words between September 2000 and October 2008 alone.

Table 3: Search of Dáil debates September 2000 to July 2009 for metro, rail and PPP

Period	Metro North project: Description of activity	Documents found
September to December 2000	DTO publishes outline strategy document “A Platform for Change”.	10
January to December 2001	RPA established. DTO publishes final strategy document “A Platform for Change”.	16
January to December 2002	RPA submits Outline Business Case. Government considers timeframe too long and cost too expensive.	28
January to December 2003	RPA makes a presentation to a cabinet sub-committee. RPA submits a revised proposal for metro to government, for a line from city centre to airport with option to extend line to Swords. RPA submits further options to government.	19
January to December 2004	RPA formally ‘stand down’ the metro project team.	15
January to December 2005	“MetroNorth: A Link to the Future” is published by local councils, airport and RPA. Government publishes “Transport 21” plan for capital investment for years 2006 to 2015. Metro rebranded as Metro North, for line from city centre to airport and Swords, and identified as a key priority.	10
January to December 2006	RPA commenced process of assessing alternative route alignments.	11
January to December 2007	Metro North PPP is advertised in OJEU. Four consortia prequalified for invitation to tender.	11
January to December 2008	Tender documentation issued to four consortia. Application made for Railway Order.	26
January to July 2009	Two consortia selected to proceed to final stage of procurement.	0
Total number of documents found in search of Dáil debates		146

5: Summary and Conclusion

The relevance of the ‘agendas and alternatives’ framework was tested by means of an analysis of parliamentary debates. **Table 2** showed that Metro North was discussed in parliament, and also that some of the key issues from the PPP literature had featured in those discussions, and **Table 3** showed that some of those discussions were grouped around some periods of considerable activity in the Metro North project, such as in late-2000 and in 2002. However, there seems to be comparatively little discussion at other periods of considerable activity, such as in 2005. The next step would be to expand on the analysis from searches 9 and 10 and to examine in greater detail the issues raised in the parliamentary debates from the documents relating to **Table 2**. The documents generated by the search of Dáil debates could be broken down between different types of parliamentary proceedings, in order to focus on those that are relevant to this research. Content analysis could focus on the particular PPP terms from management accounting literature, such as *VFM*, *risk*, *accountability* and *efficiency*, because these four terms have achieved a high number of search results. An analysis could also be done whereby the parliamentary contributions are categorised according to whether the speaker is from the government or Opposition side of parliament [25], and also by exploring what drives the attention of particular parties to certain issues [26].

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