



THE POLITICS OF PSYCHOLOGY & PSYCHOLOGY OF POLITICS

To say it has been an interesting couple of months since I last sat down to compose a column does not seem to do justice to the term interesting. In keeping with the title of this column, it seems apt to be reminded that a week is a long time in politics, but this might get amended in 2020 to "a day is a long time in the era of COVID-19".

As we continue, as individuals and as psychologists, to do the best we can on a day-to-day basis, we should also keep one eye on the future. Early data from the United States is noting a doubling of rates of diagnosis of anxiety and depression during COVID-19. As we unfortunately know all too well, across the full spectrum of support services in Ireland we have often been stretched to breaking point. If the level of psychological distress and need arising from COVID-19 approaches anywhere near the levels predicted, it will be a difficult path ahead and we will need everyone to assist with meeting the potential needs that will arise.

Amid all this, the Government published *Sharing the Vision*, the roadmap for mental health services for the next 10 years. In PSI we have been critical of the process that developed this vision from the outset, as it has no direct psychology input compared to the original *A Vision for Change* policy. For those of you who do not follow my ramblings on Twitter, I have not held back in my criticisms of the failure to make the original vision a reality, particularly in terms of staff shortages in comparison to what was recommended.

In 2019, my year as PSI President Elect, I decided to take a more direct political route to influence change because, as much as I enjoy social media advocacy, it did not appear to be bearing the fruit of the effort that went into it. Meetings in Leinster House with opposition party spokespersons who were drafting party manifestos in advance of the recent election helped me to understand better the value of more direct political advocacy. Throughout this year I have had many conversations with politicians from all parties and groups, senior civil servants and senior officials in the Health Service Executive (HSE). All see psychology as having a valuable role to play in our society and in our health service. My sense is that on too many occasions psychology has been the equivalent of the small child peering through the window at others who have a seat at the table where meaningful decisions are made. I have struggled to understand why that was, until this year. A theme emerged from the discussions I have had with those in positions of authority, and that is that psychology does not seem to speak with one voice, and if we cannot agree amongst ourselves about what we have to offer as one united discipline then how can we ever convince anyone else of our value? It is not an unfair observation I believe. I recently contributed some input on the topic of divided societies for the American Psychological Association 2020 Annual Convention and it led me to reflect on the possibility that, for far too long, it could be argued that we ourselves have been a divided profession.

Many of our professional training programmes have been moving towards a competency model of training and assessment. For psychology to become one voice we need to have an appreciation

for the competencies of each of the disciplines of psychology. We have far more in common than divides us. There is not just room for multiple, sometimes competing or even opposing perspectives to be heard within psychology and PSI, there is a need for it. This should not be about who has the "best" competencies or more of them, but what blend of competencies each of us can bring to our roles that will complement each other and affect meaningful change for those we help. We tirelessly work with others to assist them to find solutions to problems that seem intractable. Surely it should not be too much to expect that we could find equitable solutions to our own issues? To model what we recommend others might do? This year we have been working internally and with colleagues external to PSI to find solutions to issues that have historically fragmented our unity and limited our potential for political effectiveness. This must be our ongoing focus.

One of the things I found most interesting in terms of the reaction to the publication of *Sharing the Vision* was that it seemed to act as a wakeup call to our profession. On the surface, it appeared psychology was being written out of mental health services. I think we would all prefer to work towards healing and unity from a positive future-oriented position, but at times it would appear that the perception of a potential existential crisis can be the unintended clarion call that was needed.

We recently lost one of the primary architects of peace on our island and Honorary Fellow of the Society, John Hume. As a starting point for psychology to move forward with one voice I think it is helpful to recall some of his words of healing and unity, "*We're much closer together in the world today than we ever were in the past. Given that it is a much smaller world, we are in a stronger position to shape that world*". COVID-19 has made the world a much smaller place with virtual communications and psychology is very strongly placed to shape our new realities in a positive way. For many of us reflective practice has been a core and beneficial feature of our training, but I would argue that we must also balance this with direct and proactive advocacy. In the words of Robin Williams, "*You must strive to find your own voice because the longer you wait to begin, the less likely you are to find it at all*".

PSI was not invited to the launch of *Sharing the Vision*, nor on the list of advocacy groups who were designated to be briefed in advance of the launch, until we demanded it. Sitting on the sidelines expecting or hoping that those in power and influence will seek our input on psychological issues has not and does not serve us well. It is not also just about calling for change, we do not want to be like that well-known Simpsons meme "Old man shouts at cloud". We need to be doing the time-consuming work of knocking on political doors and when we do not get the response we require, we keep knocking until we do. It is the only way. "*Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we have been waiting for. We are the change that we seek*" (President Barack Obama).

By the time this column is published, we will have had direct meetings with the Minister for Mental Health and I hope the Minister for Children, discussing issues such as primary care psychology, funding for counselling and educational trainees, the panel system, preliminary team assessment under Assessment of Need and the operationalisation of the DARE scheme. Meetings with the ministers for Education and for Further & Higher Education & Research have also been requested.

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

These meetings came about not just because of making direct contact with ministers, but also with each of their respective opposition party equivalents, advocating and sometimes when needed, demanding for our voice to be heard. We have also been very active with our colleagues in Mental Health Reform, the Children's Rights Alliance, and the Health & Social Care Professionals Alliance in pushing the psychology agenda and they have all been supportive partners.

I have been assured by representatives from the Department of Health that PSI will be represented on the *Sharing the Vision* Implementation group, having originally not been listed as a potential member. I intend to hold the Department of Health to that assurance. This would

represent a valuable opportunity for PSI to be at the centre of policy implementation for mental health for the next ten years.

One of the things that has helped communities weather the worst of the impact of COVID-19 was them pulling together, having a sense of cohesiveness and collective and unity for the good of each other. Surely now is the time for psychology to pull together for the discipline of psychology and those we help?

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2020 PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF IRELAND MEMBER AWARDS



The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) Member Awards are designed to recognise excellence in research, practice and education in psychology by members. These awards will range from those studying or teaching psychology to those making significant contributions in their professional careers. The categories will include:

1. Early career psychologists;
2. Award for contribution to research in psychology;
3. Award for contribution to professional practice psychology.

This will involve a clear and transparent nominations process with set criteria for adjudication. The adjudication panel will consist of:

- PSI President (*Chair of Adjudication Panel*);
- An academic psychologist;
- An early career psychologist representative;
- A professional practice psychologist.

An individual may only be nominated once, and for one award category, in any particular year. Both the proposer

and the nominee must be current PSI members and the nominee should consent to being nominated. Winners will be announced and presented with the award at the PSI Annual Conference. Winners will be listed on the PSI website.

Nomination materials should be submitted via email to the Awards Committee Chair at communications@psychologicalsociety.ie

Please note:

- Nominees can only be considered for **one** award category in any given year.
- Please ensure this category is clearly identified in the nomination form.
- Names will **not** be considered by the Awards Committee without a completed nomination form.
- Nominations will **not** be considered if the nomination is received after the closing date for receipt of nominations.
- Nominations will **not** be considered if the word count is exceeded.
- An acknowledgement email will be sent to the **nominator** upon receipt of the completed nomination form.

To submit a nomination for the PSI Member Awards, download and complete the form available in the News section of www.psychologicalsociety.ie. Please send completed forms by email to communications@psychologicalsociety.ie by 5pm on Friday 18 September 2020.