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Interview



# THE PERSUADER

Marie O'Connor FCCA has used her influencing powers for Ireland's advantage in a career that included an important, and largely unsung, role in the development of the IFSC. She talks to **Donal Nugent**

**T**he winds of change are blowing through the audit profession right now but, if you are expecting one of the country's most experienced audit professionals to be on the defensive as a result, think again. Marie O'Connor FCCA believes change is both inevitable and to be welcomed. 'In general, given the way the profession has developed over the last few years, partners have already become much more involved in the detail of audit,' she says. A tangible expression of this is the fact that soon, instead of signing off with the company name, auditors will be required to put their own signature to an audit. 'That doesn't necessarily change how one does one's work,' O'Connor notes, 'but it does re-emphasise the responsibility that auditors take on. We have a regime and a process through which audit is carried out, but the final responsibility rests with the individual partner.'

Reflecting on the European Commission's Green Paper on Audit, O'Connor says there is no reason to be surprised or daunted by the scope of the proposed reforms. PwC Ireland, of which she is one of 112 partners, welcomed its publication in October last year and set out a number of proposals which it argues will increase transparency and extend the scope of audit. The firm also agrees there is a need to examine afresh the role of audit in relation to financial institutions. 'Audit has evolved over the years and standards have evolved over time. Is it a surprise

that it is evolving again now? No. Any time there is a crisis, you have to look again at all the service providers and everyone with responsibility has to look at themselves in relation to it. We welcome change and are very keen to participate in the debate along with all the other stakeholders, such as the audit committees. So, it's a question of being part of the conversation and finding a solution that's workable.'

For O'Connor, that workable solution must centre on a multidisciplinary team, however. 'That model is the right one, as far as I'm concerned, and should be at the core of developments going forward. It's the model that works in most European countries, with slight variations, and it is the model that gives clients the most choice. It allows them to go to a trusted adviser and get the services they require in particular circumstances.' Additionally, she argues, the multidisciplinary team is the best way of ensuring the profession continues to attract the brightest new talent. 'If you only provide one service, you may not be a very interesting organisation for a lot of talented people to build long-term careers in and that, I think, would be to the detriment of the profession.'

## Pathway

Audit has been O'Connor's chosen field since she joined Craig Gardner & Co., the precursor to PwC in Ireland, as a graduate of the College of Commerce, Rathmines. 'Getting into audit was not a big decision,' she says. 'It was what all the people ahead of me were

doing. The preferred route was to get established in audit and, if you had an appetite for tax, you could move on to that eventually.' O'Connor took to the area from the start, getting to work with 'some fantastic clients' who were, in many respects, the cream of Ireland's small, but diverse, corporate portfolio in the 1970s – companies such as P.J. Carroll, Sisk and Waterford Crystal, 'all very dynamic, successful Irish entrepreneurial companies, often with international operations'. O'Connor believes that the key to good audit is relationship building, 'assessing the environment and the people you are dealing with – and being able to do that really quickly, thinking on your feet.' Equally useful in building her skill set was the chance to return to the same organisations over a number of years, eventually in more senior roles. 'You learned about companies in a lot more depth in this way,' she says. As the largest accountancy firm in Dublin, Craig Gardner & Co. provided the opportunity to work in large teams, a situation that proved hugely valuable for someone with an appetitive for learning. 'You were always learning from each team you were in and, over the years, you would see different styles, some more inclusive than others. One of the great things about those early days was that people still had time to take out a pen and show you how to do something.'

## Investment in Ireland

While her expertise may have been in audit, O'Connor's negotiation and

persuasion skills were, arguably, brought most impressively to the fore in the role she played in championing foreign direct investment (FDI) into Ireland, building the reputation of the country as the ideal bridgehead into Europe for American companies through the 1980s and 1990s. 'Soon after I became a partner, I was asked if I would take an interest in FDI. We had a lot of links with tax partners in other PwC firms in America and what we wanted to ensure was that they understood what was happening in Ireland but, most importantly, knew who to contact if one of their clients was interested in setting up in Europe.'

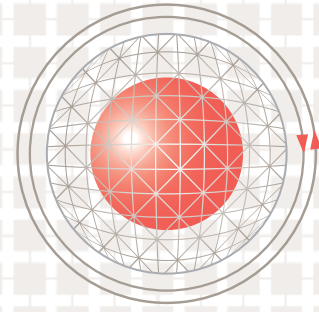
### Financial focus

In the early days, the field was less specialised than it would become and O'Connor was involved with a range of major corporations, stretching from technology and pharmaceutical companies. With the mooted establishment of a new financial district in Dublin in the late 1980s, her focus would narrow and she played a central role in selling the message of the IFSC to the funds industry, building, in the process, what would become a hugely successful element of PwC's Irish portfolio. Appointed the lead partner of the firm's Irish asset management practice in 1996, a position she held until 2007, she would also serve as the financial services leader. 'In the 1990s, the IFSC was coming to life and, at that point, I started to work almost entirely with financial institutions,' she recalls. 'The whole idea was to go to meet business people in the US, explain what was happening in Europe and how Ireland, and the IFSC, could be used as a location. You weren't trying to sell yourself, your firm, or anything else, you were essentially trying to get Europe and Ireland on the agenda of these companies.' While knowledge of Ireland was low in the early days, the canvassing process was often well served by the presence of Irish ex-pats high up in the hierarchy of corporate

business in America. This, she notes, could often be a double-edged sword: 'if an Irish person in the team was trying to deliver a project for Ireland, they had to be the most objective person in the room, so we had to go to great lengths to ensure they had as much information as possible to make the case'.

As lead engagement partner, she is credited with advising a number of the leading US asset management groups who first established operations in Ireland, paving the way for the huge success story the IFSC would become.

O'Connor recalls the achievements as a team effort, explaining how, at home, partners who had worked with indigenous fund entities had leveraged that experience to show investors the potential for growth. 'We started off with a very dynamic team and everyone was focused on getting the message out about Ireland. We had tremendous fun along the way, we worked with wonderful clients and the rest is history.' From a standing start in 1995, today 40% of the world's hedge funds are administered from Ireland. Some 12,000 people are employed in this field, with the IDA estimating that, for every one direct job, another indirect job is created. More impressively still, the sector has remained remarkably resilient through the downturn, continuing to grow in 2009 and 2010. Recognising the major role that FDI played in transforming the economy in the 1990s, O'Connor says that, while Ireland will now have to work hard to keep those firms here, the story of inward investment is not over. 'For companies that are familiar with our environment, we need to work hard to keep them here, of course, and the retention of our corporate tax rate is central to that. But I'm absolutely clear that we also have a very experienced and competitive proposition for new companies to invest here.' While the corporation tax rate gets most attention, she argues that one of the issues that also requires close attention, if Ireland is to continue to attract a highly-educated



## The CV

**1971**

**Enrols in the business course in the College of Commerce, Rathmines, the first woman to do so.**

**1986**

**Becomes the first female and first ACCA audit partner in Craig Gardner & Co.**

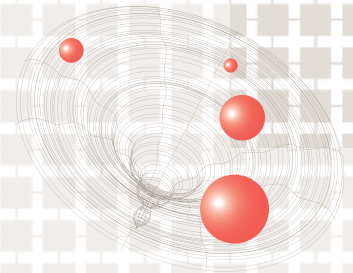
**1996**

**Appointed lead partner of the Irish asset management practice and to the PwC Global Asset Management leadership team.**

mobile workforce, is our personal tax rate. 'Personal income tax here is already quite high and, if it gets much higher, that will put us at a competitive disadvantage.'

### Pioneer

O'Connor's capacity to marshal an argument manifested itself at a relatively early age. Finishing school at 16, she was too young for university and enrolled in a secretarial course in the College of Commerce, Rathmines. Quickly mastering those skills, she soon found herself intrigued by the college's business course. Amazingly, though it was the early 1970s, the admissions policy still proudly proclaimed its objective as being to prepare young men for the world of business. 'So the challenge was to get into a course that didn't take women,' she explains, adding that 'a lot of persuasion was required. People were very supportive, in general, but there was still a rigorous interview process, and tests, before I was accepted.' All too aware that she was an experiment, O'Connor realised the only way to dispel the doubters was to excel. She got first place in the Christmas exams in her first year and graduated top of the class two years later. By the time



## The basics:

**PwC**

**1865**

**Samuel Lowell Price goes into partnership with Edwin Waterhouse.**

**1866**

**Craig Gardner & Co. founded by William Craig and Robert Gardner in Dublin.**

**1974**

**Craig Gardner becomes a member of the Price Waterhouse (PW) international network.**

**1998**

**Price Waterhouse merges with Coopers & Lybrand to form PricewaterhouseCoopers, rebranding as PwC in 2010.**

she left, there were six women enrolled two years behind her.

The experience would, undoubtedly, influence how she approached her career long afterwards. 'Up until that point, I had never had to make a case for anything, so here was an experience of needing to argue a point and succeeding well enough to be taken seriously.'

### Law

This capacity would be further fine tuned in the years after her graduation, as she decided to study for the bar, part time, in her first years with Craig Gardner & Co. 'I didn't do it, necessarily, with the intention of qualifying but because, at the time, I was interested in law and the bar was something that people in other professions did part time.' O'Connor never practiced as a barrister, explaining that, while accountancy was certainly where she saw her career, it was also necessary to make a choice based on where her best opportunity lay as a woman. 'At the time, it appeared women would do better in accountancy than at the bar. That's difficult to conceive now, but you have to put your mind back to the time. I was subsequently proved wrong, in fact, because while women have done well in accountancy, they have done phenomenally well in law.'

O'Connor was introduced to ACCA in her college days, where the business students were encouraged to take a professional qualification to augment the diploma. What struck her most about the experience was the positive learning environment in which it was conducted. 'The approach was competitive, but it was not about skewering the guy beside you. It was about trying to do a little bit better than the year before you, to break new ground if it was possible. Everyone encouraged you and, if you failed, it wasn't the end of the world. The

incentive was there to thrive'. Some years later, when she became the first female partner in Craig Gardner & Co., at the age of 32, she was also the first ACCA partner. She recalls some discussion, at the time, as to whether a certified accountant could be an audit partner in a chartered firm, a discussion she was more than happy to guide in the right direction. Today, there are seven ACCA partners in PwC Ireland, and the firm is also an ACCA Approved Employer.

### Outside roles

O'Connor has held a number of non-executive directorships through her career and sees them as offering a unique porthole into other companies from which to learn and to contribute. 'I would hope that what I've seen has helped inform my approach. One of the great things, particularly in a smaller organisation, is that you really get to see what your contribution is.'

Having served on the board of the IDA, the American Chamber of Commerce and the Dublin Airport Authority, over the years, she still holds a particular affinity for her first appointment when, as a young mother, she served on the finance committee of Temple Street Children's Hospital. 'I learned a lot there and felt that we achieved a lot. We were working in an environment, not unlike today, when we had to deal with horrendous cutbacks and find ways to raise money.'

Serving as a PwC partner in the last few years, those skills and experience have been called on afresh. 'As a large employer in the economy, we suffered the same symptoms as other companies. There were challenges and cost restructuring measures. We did those at an early stage, and our staff shared a lot of the pain with us, and we now have a more competitive base to grow from.' Working with graduates, she sees the challenges young people face in the current climate, but is pleased to note that the experience

in PwC is largely a positive one. 'Interestingly, the graduates who come out of our training programmes, where we can't keep them on ourselves, have largely had no difficulties in finding employment, even when they have come back after a year or two of travelling. We often have clients calling us up asking to recommend some people from our programmes and the reality is that most of them have already found employment'.

With the economy having come through an unprecedented crisis, she agrees with those who hold that an export-led recovery is, essentially, the only show in town. 'Effectively, we export 100% of our output and services play a large part of that. We have a fantastic range of skills and have a fantastically well-educated workforce. We need to ensure the reality of that continues to be communicated out there.'