

The **DECLINE** *of the* **PUBLIC SERVICE**
in **DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENTS**

WHAT HAPPENED?



Edited by

B. GUY PETERS
DONALD J. SAVOIE

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2025

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Peters, B. Guy, eds.; Savoie, Donald J., eds.

Authors: Boston, Jonathan; Dixon, Ruth; Georgakakis, Didier; Hood, Christopher; Kikuchi, Masao; Martigny, Vincent; Namkoong, Keun; Peters, B. Guy; Raadschelders, Jos C.N.; Savoie, Donald J.; Sundström, Göran; van Thiel, Sandra; Veit, Sylvia

Published by the Donald J. Savoie Institute
Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada
www.djsi.ca

Book and cover design by Rayola Creative
Cover illustration by Kevin House

ISBN 978-0-88659-306-3 (PDF)
ISBN 978-0-88659-307-0 (PDF français)

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: What happened? : the decline of the public service in democratic governments / edited by B. Guy Peters and Donald J. Savoie.

Other titles: Decline of the public service in democratic governments

Names: Peters, B. Guy, editor. | Savoie, Donald J., 1947- editor. | Université de Moncton. Donald J. Savoie Institute, publisher.

Description: Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: Canadiana 20250191563 | ISBN 9780886593063 (PDF)

Subjects: LCSH: Civil service—History—Case studies. | LCSH: Administrative agencies—Public opinion—Case studies. | LCSH: Public officers—Employment—Case studies. | LCSH: Comparative government—Case studies.

Classification: LCC JF1601 .W43 2025 | DDC 352.6/3—dc23

Dedicated to the memory of Christopher Hood.

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*This collection of essays was made possible by a grant from
The Jarislowsky Foundation.*

Introduction

DONALD J. SAVOIE

NATIONAL POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE INSTITUTIONS are not faring as well as they did in years past. In the United States, public opinion surveys reveal that in 2022 only 27 percent of Americans had “a great deal or quite a lot of confidence” across institutions in contrast to 50 percent in 1979 (Gallup, 2022). Europe is not different where trust in national institutions is also in decline (Arrighi et al., 2022). The same is true in other countries (Canada, 2023). Public opinion surveys carried out in OECD countries report that only 4 out of 10 people now trust their national governments (OECD, 2021, p. 1).

This has not always been so. By the end of the Second World War, the public’s belief in the ability of national governments to get things done was high in many Western countries. Both Germany and Japan also demonstrated strong economic growth in the post-World War II period, with their civil services playing an important part. It became clear that national governments were able, in moments of crisis and when moved by an overriding goal, to lead their countries and accomplish great things. Politicians and most citizens trusted career officials to define proper policy prescriptions and deliver programs in an efficient manner. The relationship between politicians and career officials was healthy and productive, as published memoirs of politicians from that era reveal (Macmillan, 1973; Pearson, 2015). In brief, national governments and their civil services proved to be highly effective in working with partners, notably the private sector, in clearing the way for economies to grow. But things have changed. More and more politicians are openly critical of civil servants, as trust in national governments continues on a downward slide (Dionne, 2001; Smith, 2024).

So, what happened? Why is trust in national governments declining? Why are some politicians on the government side turning on their own troops? Why are some politicians pointing at national civil services, labelling them as the deep state that needs to be deconstructed? (Clark, n.d.). Why have politicians considerably expanded the size of their own offices to check on the influence of career government officials or to get things done? Why is morale among career

government officials on a downward slide? Are national governments as effective as they once were in developing their national economies and in delivering government programs and services? Are national civil services still able to attract the best and brightest to serve? If not, why not?

We decided to assemble a team of top scholars from several countries to take stock of national institutions, with a focus on the state of national civil services over time. We believe that a comparative perspective can shed new light on the challenges confronting national civil services. We can learn a great deal more from a comparative perspective about the impact of change even to a specific public service than by focussing exclusively on one. As Ferrel Heady argued, we can “enrich general public administration by widening the horizon of interest in such a way that understanding of one’s own national system of administration will be enhanced by placing it in a cross-cultural setting” (Heady, 1904, p. 48).

There is, however, a risk in comparing the state of national institutions over time. Looking to the past through rose-coloured glasses can promote a view that “things were better back then.” As Norman Birnbaum writes: “ages always appear more golden when they recede” (Birnbaum, 2002). The risk of suffering from golden ageism is greater when looking at national civil services because there are always many forces at play influencing their performance. As an institution, a national civil service is not autonomous. It reports to political institutions. In the case of the Westminster-inspired political systems, for example, a national civil service is not to have a personality different from the government of the day (Thomas et al., 2022). That said, the role of the civil service in different political systems remains the same everywhere — it exists to support the elected government of the day in developing policies and implementing programs and delivering services.

It is against this backdrop that we set out to compare the state of national civil services between today and the post-World War II period to the 1970s. To be sure, views differ. Some maintain that a closer look reveals that, all was not well or not nearly as well in years past as we might believe, with national governments or national civil services some sixty years ago. There were also important problems and shortcomings back then, much like there are today. There is also no agree-

ment on the reasons why national governments and their civil services may not measure up to what they were sixty years ago.

Many believe that politicians are the ones to blame to explain why national governments do not enjoy the level of trust that they once had with citizens. They arrive in office with many unrealistic political commitments expecting civil servants to implement them without creating political controversies when things do not work out as planned. And, when problems do arise, in many cases politicians will happily assign blame onto the bureaucrats. Politicians, in more than one national setting, increasingly make the case that “bureaucrats” are not up to standard in delivering their campaign commitments, in managing effectively government programs or in providing policy advice. There is also a sense that all issues are now political which explains, in large measure, why politicians have expanded the size of their personal offices to enable to manage issues or files that matter to them or the media (Craft, 2015; Eichbaum & Shaw, 2018). Sixty years ago, or before the introduction of several transparency requirements including right to information legislation, many issues were left to civil servants to manage. Politicians and senior civil servants were also able to operate away from public scrutiny, at least of the kind we see today.

Things also always look simple while in opposition where one does not have to deal with competing forces, sort out how initiatives can be implemented or identify new sources of funding to support campaign commitments. Career officials often know better but very rarely engage in public debates with their political masters to explain misguided policies or failures in program delivery. To do so would turn them into political actors and compromise their non-partisan status. In addition, politicians have, since the 1980s, told senior civil servants to focus on management issues and to emulate their private sector counterparts, convinced that government officials could learn lessons from the business community on how best to manage programs and deliver services. The great majority of the countries surveyed pursued New Public Management measures, albeit to various degrees. However, the efforts have for the most part failed for a variety of reasons including the reality that managing in the private and public sectors is different in fundamental ways (Allison, 1984). In brief, it is unfair to blame civil servants for the inability of governments to pursue suc-

cessfully new management measures because political and administrative institutions are tied at the hip (Elston, 2024).

We have also seen a decline of deference to government leaders in recent years with the 24-hour news channels, the arrival of social media and numerous transparency requirements that both politicians and career officials have to contend with. A more integrated global economy and the collapse of boundaries or jurisdictions between government departments and, at times, between governments to get things done have made accountability requirements much more difficult to pursue than in years past. What about the arrival of public sector unions and their impact on public sector management and on the day-to-day work of managers? These are just a few developments that continue to have an important impact on how national governments shape policies and how national civil services implement programs and deliver public services.

The chapters raise fundamental issues about national governments and public sector management, issues that should not be ignored. There is a need, for example, to revisit the working relationship between politicians and career officials and to ask questions about the role politicians should play in program delivery. There is also a need to revisit accountability requirements. Should, for example, public servants be held publicly responsible and accountable for their work and, if so, what would be the impact on political institutions, on accountability and on the work of non-partisan civil services? The traditional anonymity of the civil servant has, in many countries, been eroded so that they are now visible and subject to attacks in the media and the legislature.

It is also important to note that civil servants in some contexts have fought back against increased politicization, especially when confronted by governments headed by illiberal populist parties (Yesilkagit et al., 2024). This resistance may be in the form of shirking, or it may be more overt attempts to undermine the programs of the politicians. In some instances, civil servants have gone so far as to engage in political protests against the government of the day.

The collection of essays explores these issues and points to several important challenges confronting national governments and their civil services. The essays also reveal some sharp differences between national

governments in how politicians and civil servants work, as well as common ground. The comparative perspective sheds new light on how national governments have been able to cope or deal with far reaching changes to the political-economic and media environments in which they operate. Some countries have been able to perform better than others and some countries value the work of career officials better than others. National governments that value and support their civil services tend to outperform those that do not.

Aaron Wildavsky observed in 1988 that “the most senior bureaucracy is now only for the brave” (Wildavsky, 1988, p. 755). This remains the case today, if anything, even more so. Our multi-country survey reveals several remarkably similar challenges between different national settings. What is the case in European countries in public administration resembles what we see in Asian countries. This suggests that national governments and their civil services everywhere are dealing with a growing number of common problems no matter how political institutions operate or their historical background. The challenges thus transcend different national political settings and different political institutions.

As already noted, nearly all national civil services, no matter the political system in which they operate, have been asked to implement New Public Management measures. If nothing else, attempts to pursue New Public Management measures make the point that the work and contributions of civil servants are not as well valued as they once were. Civil servants were and are told that their ability to manage government operations efficiently does not measure up and that they have to look outside their institutions for solutions. Politicians talked a good line about the need to implement new management practices by looking to the business community for inspiration. However, they never accepted delegating full management authority to permanent government officials so that senior civil servants are able to own their work, own their mistakes and own their management decisions like senior business executives can. If different national civil services in different political systems share similar challenges, is it possible to establish common ground when defining measures to strengthen their ability to provide policy advice without fear or favour and deliver programs and services in an efficient manner? The collection also explores this issue.

How then do the authors explain the decline in trust in national governments or in national civil services? For one thing, the political environment is far more demanding today than it was 40 to 60 years ago. The political discourse has taken on a much more aggressive turn and the coarsening of political debates no longer ends when the election campaign is over. Permanent election campaigns and a media that never sleeps are now part of the governing process leading governments to favour announcements over implementation or execution. The arrival of 24-hour news channels and social media have also taken the cover off government operations, so that everything has to be done in the open and issues, however trivial, can quickly become political, requiring a political response. The line between the political and the administrative is today much more blurred than it was some sixty years ago. Politicians and their partisan political staffers are much more prone to go deep in the bureaucracy to secure answers to manage what they consider to be delicate political issues than was the case 40 to 60 years ago. The widespread belief that private sector management practices are superior to those in government has sapped the energy and morale of career government officials. There are still other reasons that the authors explore that make the point that it is much more difficult and more demanding to be a civil servant today than in years past.

Outline of study

Jos Raadschelders provides readers with an historical perspective of the work of government bureaucracies from when civil servants served elites including emperors, kings and queens to serving people through their elected representatives. The transition shaped the modern civil service and how it operates. Rather than inheriting or buying a position and serving a king, by the eighteenth century, civil servants began to occupy a paid position tied to specific responsibilities and working for the population at large. That said, merit-based hiring and training of government officials began centuries earlier in some countries, going back to Antiquity.

Raadschelders makes the point that if there were a golden age for the civil service, it dates back to the late nineteenth century, when career government officials began to look to elected officials and the

constitution to guide their work and it continues to this day. He argues that, if anything, the role of civil servants in providing policy advice and delivering programs is stronger today than in years past. To the extent that civil services are confronting problems, it is tied to bureaucracy bashing based on a misunderstanding of the role of career government officials. Civil servants can never operate like their private sector counterparts, as New Public Management measures call for. He explains: “politicians have learned how to kiss babies, civil servants change the diapers.” It is civil servants who do the heavy lifting and who have been able to turn government into a “key social actor working for people at large.”

Christopher Hood and Ruth Dixon review the work of the British civil service from the immediate post-World War II period to today. They report that public opinion surveys reveal a decline in public satisfaction with government during this period. They are quick to add, however, that the surveys do not point the finger at either politicians or civil servants.

Hood and Dixon argue that there is not much difference in the size of the British civil service (non-industrial) between the 1940s and the 2020s. However, today it is more highly educated, less working class than in years past and vastly more female. The civil service has also changed in other ways — growth in its number of arms-length regulators, more transparency and “gamekeeper” requirements and changes to the traditional bargain guiding the relationship between politicians and civil servants. Current political and bureaucratic blunders that give governments a bad reputation are not new — they have been around since the post-World War II period. The modern media tend to amplify blunders far more than was the case fifty years ago. Hood and Dixon conclude that the idea of a golden age or competitive civil service in the post-World War II period, that has nosedived in recent years, does not square with the available evidence.

B. Guy Peters writes that it is now in fashion in some quarters to “denigrate” the civil service. That said, he maintains that evidence makes clear that the American public is well satisfied with the level of service provided by the three levels of government, in particular by local and state governments. He adds that the number of scandals,

blunders and corruption by bureaucrats is low, but the same cannot be said for politicians.

Peters points the finger at politicians for challenges now confronting the national civil service. The Trump administration (2017–2021) had little, if any, respect for the civil service and the institution saw a major loss of talent. The American civil service also now has to deal with a number of constraints imposed by political actors in the executive branch designed to limit the autonomy of civil servants. This is in addition to the tendency on the part of Congress to impose organizational hurdles on government agencies delivering services.

Donald J. Savoie, unlike most of the other authors, sees a golden age for the Canadian civil service. He writes about the strong working relationships between politicians and civil servants from the late 1940s to the early 1970s. They worked hand-in-hand and respected each other's roles and responsibilities to plan and deliver a series of national initiatives. But things began to unravel in the 1970s. The point was brought home by Gordon Robertson, former Secretary to the Cabinet and described as the gold standard for anyone that followed in that role. He observed: "I guess I don't trust the government." Paul Tellier, a highly respected former head of the national civil service, now speaks of a lack of trust between politicians and civil servants. Public opinion surveys also reveal a downward slide in the level of trust Canadians have towards senior federal civil servants.

Savoie identifies several reasons for the above. The Canadian bureaucracy now has to deal with highly demanding transparency requirements that did not exist seven or eight decades ago. Access to information legislation, combined with 24-hour television news channels and social media have transformed how the federal government operates. Politicians have added numerous new political staffers to their offices (from 3 or 4, as recently as forty years ago, to up to 25 today). The focus today among both political staffers and senior civil servants is to generate announceables, not on execution or program implementation. Fifty years ago, only 28 percent of federal civil servants worked in the National Capital Region, while today the number is getting close to 50 percent. As a result, programs and services delivery, the point where Canadians meet government services, has suffered.

Göran Sundström also writes about a “Golden Age” for the Swedish state administration starting in the 1930s and lasting until the late 1980s. Sweden’s civil service long valued objectivity and equal treatment in delivering programs and services and all the while sought to promote a respectful dialogue with politicians. Sweden has been able to implement a wide series of government programs from health insurance to public pensions. In building its welfare state, it was understood by all sides that politicians would take full responsibility when things went off the rails.

Sweden, like many other national governments, embraced private sector-inspired management reform measures beginning in the late 1980s that sought to reshape the civil service. The reforms promoted a more program delivery-minded civil service with a focus on measuring and controlling cost. But the improvements came at a cost — a loss of sense of community inside the government with departments and agencies pursuing their own goals. In addition, there is now a reluctance among civil servants to “speak truth to power.” The relationship between politicians and civil servants is changing, becoming more hierarchical with bureaucrats taking orders rather than promoting a frank exchange of ideas. Sundström concludes with suggestions or ways to strengthen the civil service and to “rediscover bureaucracy.”

Sylvia Veit looks to history to explain the strengths of Germany’s civil service: loyalty, neutrality, parsimony and incorruptibility. She ties the values of the civil service to the Weberian ideal of a rule-based, impartial and professional civil service. However, she argues that, to the extent that Germany’s civil service had a golden period, it only has been during the last few decades. She raises questions about the civil service’s ability to act as a backbone of democracy, given the role it played during the last days of the Weimar Republic and when the Nazis were in power.

Senior civil servants in Germany are for the most part highly educated. They are expected and encouraged by politicians to play an important role in shaping policy and, as a result, they have easy access to ministers. That ease of access is also aided by the existence of “political civil servants” at the top of ministerial hierarchies. It is important to underline the point that the German civil service has not been as badly bruised by the introduction of private sector management prac-

tices as have other civil services. A primary concern, among civil servants, remains over the arrival of authoritarian politicians to power and whether they could control and misuse the civil service.

Masao Kikuchi documents the role that the Japanese civil service played in Japan's economic development including the important role it played working with private sector representatives in the post-World War II period. Given that members of the Japanese Parliament were expelled by allied forces in the immediate aftermath of the war, the civil service was left to pick up the pieces and provide the policy making capacity for Japan to restructure its economy.

The values of Japanese civil servants have been shaped by Confucian culture and its respect for authority, hierarchy and a strong desire to meet moral obligations. Kikuchi outlines these models that have shaped the Japanese civil service: the patriotic, the coordinating and the clerical bureaucrat. All three played their part in developing the civil service with their influence shifting, over time, with the clerical bureaucrat on an incline since the 1990s. The emphasis in recent years has been on decentralization and promoting administrative efficiency.

New Public Management measures have not been pursued in Japan to the same extent they have been in Western countries. That said, Kikuchi reports that the civil service has lost standing and influence in recent years. It is no longer able, as it once was, to attract the best and brightest from universities. Political turmoil, a series of reforms, and scandals involving high-ranking government officials have tarnished the civil service's reputation.

The South Korean Government decided in the mid-1960s to overhaul the civil service by establishing a merit-based personnel system. It was an ambitious effort that included a centralized recruitment process, a performance rating process, a new training system and an improved pay administration. Keun Namkoong writes that starting in the 1960s, the South Korean civil service was transformed from amateur administrators to career bureaucrats. The pay was strong even when compared to the private sector, and the civil service was then able to attract the best and brightest.

Namkoong maintains, however, that the civil service has been on a gradual decline since the 1990s. He writes of a growing mistrust towards career bureaucrats on the part of politicians and the National

Assembly is strengthening its hands in dealing with the civil service. Civil servants have to contend with more and more demands for information from the legislature including “inspections” that generate numerous requests for documents and witnesses. The government embraced New Public Management measures sending out signals to senior civil servants that the private sector is more competent at managing operations than career government officials. The government also embarked on a relocation program to move many civil servants out of Seoul. Morale has suffered and surveys reveal that South Korea has seen a loss of trust in both the government and the civil service in recent years.

Sandra van Thiel writes that the Dutch civil service is highly decentralized, civil servants are highly educated and staff mobility takes place mostly within ministries. Unlike many other Western countries, senior civil servants are often members of a political party but yet political conflicts between ministers and top-level civil servants are rare. And, unlike in many other countries, ministers have few partisan political advisors, usually limited to one political staffer.

But things are also changing in the Dutch civil service. Civil servants are becoming more visible and they are increasingly coming under attack. There have been a number of instances of late where program implementation has gone off the rails. This has attracted considerable media attention, prompting finger pointing at civil servants. Parliament has launched inquiries and questions have been asked about who is accountable for the management of government operations. In some cases, civil servants have sought media interviews to talk about the challenges they have to deal with in their work and to explain their side of the story. There are also growing tensions between politicians and career government officials over the size of the bureaucracy, over who should be responsible for what and the need to attend to problems with program implementation.

Vincent Martigny reports that the French civil service enjoyed a “Golden Age” that began at the end of World War II and lasted until the late 1970s. The civil service rose to the occasion in helping France deal with the end of the German occupation and the collapse of the country’s infrastructure. Martigny writes that during this period, civil servants enjoyed a high social status as well as professional autonomy

and that the civil service was able to attract the best and brightest. Civil servants were able to build strong institutions including the *École nationale d'administration* (ENA) that played a crucial role in developing a generation of civil servants.

By the 1980s, a new mindset took hold. Politicians began making the case that the state had “reached its limits” and that the civil service could no longer meet expectations. The search was on to make the civil service more frugal, more efficient and more responsive. These measures included closing ENA in favour of a broader pattern of training. As in other Western countries, France looked to the private sector and New Public Management measures to fix the bureaucracy. The measures did empower local authorities and service providers and led to some improvements in resource allocation. However, there is also a marked decline of public trust in institutions brought about, in part, by neoliberal reforms and a perception that government bureaucracy remains inefficient and costly.

Jonathan Boston makes the case that New Zealand has been able to retain the defining characteristics of the Westminster system of government including the doctrine of collective and individual ministerial responsibility as well as a non-partisan civil service able to provide advice without fear or favour to politicians on the government side. Moreover, there has been no politicisation in the ranks of senior positions in the civil service and no evident loss of bureaucratic effectiveness. Politicians still know their roles and responsibilities and so do civil servants. New Zealand embraced with enthusiasm New Public Management measures but it did so without compromising traditional public service values.

There have been, however, recent challenges. Boston argues that politicians have been reluctant to allocate the necessary funds to deliver effectively programs and services. He also argues that civil servants are now held responsible for poor risk management, cost overruns and delays in delivering projects. No matter, New Zealand continues to enjoy above average levels of trust with the institutions of government, including the civil service. The country has also been able to weather political storms and powerful ideological currents by remaining true to constitutional conventions and traditional values

that continue to guide the working relationship between politicians and career government officials.

Didier Georgakakis looks at the 40,000-strong European administration supporting the Member States of the European Union. To be sure, the challenge for European civil servants is daunting — supporting 27 member states with sharp differences in nationality, culture, language and ideology. European civil servants enter the service through a rigorous *concours* that calls for a strong educational background and a specific skills set.

Georgakakis sees a strong period for European civil servants (circa 1985–1989) but he hesitates to label it a golden age. He identifies several ongoing issues from planning efforts needed to integrate properly new members to the union to dealing with budgetary constraints. The point is that European civil servants have to deal constantly with powerful competing forces in a demanding multi-state environment. Recent management reform measures including changes to human resources, notably the hiring process, have not helped. Georgakakis concludes that it is: “the ability of the public service to represent and embody something greater, more generous and more sustainable that underpins its legitimacy... the mission of the public service cannot be reduced to simple objectives or management plans.”

Conclusion

These case studies, and our own observations demonstrate the complexity of the interactions between civil servants, politicians, and the societies they serve. There is no single pattern of, or reason for, the apparent decline of the civil service, and indeed some authors argue against that notion. Several authors argue that little has changed or indeed the present time is the golden age. That said, in all these cases governments — both the political and the permanent components — face major challenges in providing good governance.

The authors have provided a number of insights not only about the individual countries, but also about the nature of contemporary governance in general. The focus on the role of the civil service reveals a good deal about the ways in which external changes such as the 24-hour media cycle and the increased polarization of society have made

governing more difficult. These chapters have not focused on the solutions to the problem of the declining prestige and influence of the civil service, but they have presented a thorough and compelling diagnosis of the issues.

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1



From serving ruling elite to serving the people and their representatives

**Adaptive, responsive, and
pro-active civil servants in time**

JOS C.N. RAADSCHELDERS

“What the service of the state really requires is that men shall forgo the selfish and capricious satisfaction of their subjective ends; by this sacrifice, they acquire the right to find their satisfaction in, but only in, the dutiful discharge of their public functions.”

— Hegel 1967 [1821], par. 294

“Mit schlechten Gesetzen und guten Beamten lässt sich immer noch regieren. Bei schlechten Beamten aber helfen uns die besten Gesetze nichts.”

— Bismarck

“Men who work in bureaucratic firms or organizations tend to value, not conformity, but self-direction. They are more open-minded, have more personally responsible standards of morality, and are more receptive to change than are men who work in nonbureaucratic organizations. They show greater flexibility in dealing both with perceptual and with ideational problems. They spend their leisure time in more intellectually demanding activities.”

— Kohn 1971, 465

WHETHER SERVING THE RULING ELITE only or serving the people and their elected officials, bureaucrats or (later) career civil servants have always been the backbone of government. For most of history those serving the power elites were bureaucrats (i.e., not civil servants in the contemporary meaning of the concept). The latter's role, though, changed significantly in the past two centuries, from one where bureaucrats served those in power to one where civil servants served the people and their representatives. The three epigraphs above offer a view of the civil service's role in *democratic government* that is

quite different from the stereotypical image people have of bureaucracy and its career civil servants (or bureaucrats) under *elite government*.

Historically, bureaucracy emerged as an institutional support system for the one or those in power and it was populated with members of the elite. These elites also served in the military, the priesthood, and controlled the trade and craft professions. Indeed, the elites served in multiple positions and roles, but always with an eye on controlling power. The elites, in turn, were supported by numerous bureaucrats who collected the taxes, who wrote ordinances, who supervised the local markets, and who copied decisions and regulations.

In the past 200 years or so, bureaucrats became servants of civil society, its people, and their elected officeholders. Without question, they are nowadays indispensable to democracy. What have career civil servants under democracy contributed to government and governance capacity? When did the role of civil servants shift from serving elites only to serving people and their representatives? We shall see that practices toward and ideas about good government started at the local level. We shall also see that ideas about good government in general (i.e., local up to national level) preceded actions toward that objective of good government by centuries. And we shall see that career civil servants have admirably met the challenge for better government when confronted with the rapidly changing economic, social, political, and demographic circumstances since the second half of the nineteenth century.

Where are we now? We live in a time where this unusual governing arrangement of large-scale democracy appears to be under pressure from right-wing populists (Bauer et al. 2021; *The Economist* 2023; Yessilkagit et al. 2024). One wonders whether the career civil service can still operate as (a) the backbone to democracy, (b) somewhat independent from politicized interference, and (c) a body of merit-based appointments. Is there still room in a politicized environment for speaking truth to power (Wildavsky 1987), for loyal contradiction (Van der Meer & Dijkstra 2021), for frank and fearless advice (Podger & Kettl 2024, 160), and for serving those in power without fear or favour (Savoie 2025)?

Are the days of an influential career civil service gone? Have the position and role of career civil servants been hollowed-out in democ-

racies? Was there a “golden age” of civil service? That career civil servants became increasingly influential in policy and decision making since the late nineteenth century is not contested, nor is their influence grounded in continuity in office, long-term and outcome focused (rather than the short-term and output focus dictated by the electoral cycle), substantive expertise (i.e., subject or content knowledge), and managerial experience (incl. knowledge and understanding of administrative processes and procedures) (Benveniste 1973). In this chapter the questions raised above will be addressed in seven steps. Starting with a brief description of the position and role of bureaucracy in time (section 1), the emergence of a pro-active civil service around the 1900s (section 2), and the swift changes in the *Structural Institutional Arrangements* (SIA) of government around the 1800s (section 3), I will discuss how the practice of a pro-active civil service in the modern territorial state was preceded by (a) ideas about government for people in society at large (section 4), (b) experiments with *elite/citizen-run* government at the local level (section 5), and (c) ideas about the proper training and education for bureaucrats (section 6). The reader will see how I start in the present and work my way back into Antiquity, only to return to the present day in the final section 7 when discussing the emergence of politics for power (i.e., populism) and the “seeming” decline of politics for people and policy. In that section the argument is made that “decline” of the civil service’s position and role is in the eye of the beholder and dominated and informed by superficial news bubbles and echo chambers rather than by knowledge of what the career civil service does.

1. Bureaucracy and civil service in time

Some scholars argue that bureaucracies already existed in prehistoric times (Nystrom & Nystrom 1998), but we do know that bureaucracy came into existence as a system of support for the ruler (pharaoh, lugal, emperor, king) and the ruling elite somewhere between 5 to 6,000 years ago. In fact, public bureaucracy was the first large-scale organization in society, and it would be the only large-scale organization in society well into the eighteenth century when private companies emerged and grew during the first industrial revolution (Deane 1965). As governments

were growing since the second half of the nineteenth century in terms of services and tasks, organizational structure, budget and expenditure, and regulations, the civil service increased considerably in size. No wonder that the civil service (the employees) and bureaucracy (the organization) have been an object of intensive study since then.

It is most common to study the civil service at the national level. However, proper understanding of bureaucracy in and over time is only possible when considering that development and change happen at the local up to the national, and even international, levels. Furthermore, development and change can be prompted by changing practices on-the-ground and/or by changing ideas about the position and role of government and its officials in society. In this chapter I will demonstrate that many changes in how communities of people are governed and how people think about government started local and, over time, “trickled up.”

Bureaucracy and bureaucrats have always served those in power, but since the late eighteenth century bureaucracy and its civil servants increasingly serve the population at large. Historically, bureaucracy’s position in the SIA for governing was that of a subordinate to those in political (and with economic) power. Since the late eighteenth century, though, civil servants not only serve those in elected office but also have come to:

- a) directly support citizens through re-active and pre-emptive regulation, services, tasks, and functions,
- b) increasingly play a mediating role in the system of governance by connecting with and involving various societal actors and associations in the delivery of services,
- c) invite and urge political officeholders to exercise their authority (Page 2012); and
- d) develop the capacity to speak truth to power (see above).

How and why did this happen?

2. Bureaucrats/civil servants adaptive, responsive, and pro-active: 1870–1920

Imagine a bureaucrat from ancient China, a Mesopotamian city state, or ancient Egypt meeting a career civil servant of today. He would be amazed at the extent to which his distant successor is not only adaptive and responsive to the ruling elite, but also pro-active, taking initiatives, and even prompting elected officeholders to exercise their authority. The latter is certainly the case at middle and upper levels in the modern civil service. However, the ancient predecessor would also be baffled at the discretion that career civil servants at all levels, i.e., including street-level bureaucrats, have with implementing policies and applying regulations. For most of history the bureaucrat was subservient to the ruling elite, while in the modern age the civil servant needs to be adaptive and responsive as well as pro-active for the people and its representatives.

This is nowhere clearer than in the second half of the nineteenth century when local administrators were called upon to deal with a wide range of issues that were prompted by rapid industrialization, rapid urbanization, and massive population growth. Especially in the growing urban environments, people found they could no longer rely upon one another for addressing collective challenges, and — instead — called upon their local administrators to provide services, regulations, and policies for issues and challenges that had hitherto been taken care of through the members of the local community (Balasz 1957, 1959; Van Dalen 1987). Local government growth has been measured in terms of personnel size, of horizontal and vertical organizational differentiation, of budget and expenditure, and of regulation, and each of these show a sharp curve upward from the 1870s on. Pivotal at this local government level was the role of career civil servants and especially the city managers in the USA and the town clerks/municipal secretaries in Western Europe. They had to come up with solutions to urban problems for which there was little to no historical precedent: running water supply (well, there were Roman aqueducts), an underground sewage system, road pavements, housing and zoning regulations, limiting child labour, providing gas and electricity city-wide, health inspections, garbage collection, etc. It is in

the expansion of local and subsequently of upper-level (regional and national) government between the 1870s and 1920s that the groundwork was laid for what became the administrative state that made the welfare state possible.

Next to developing and implementing new policies, offering new services, and expanding local ordinances, top local civil servants were also very active in developing education and training opportunities for the public service. In fact, the modern study of public administration emerged as one focused on practice and was developed by top local civil servants (Raadschelders 1994, 424; 1998, 17; Stillman 1998). The importance of this cannot be underestimated.

For millennia people were trained to write official documents containing, e.g., trade and wage records, letters, and instructions for clerical work. In ancient Egypt reading and writing hieroglyphs was taught in the temple-based House of Life (Per Ankh) attended by members of the elite (Ancient Egypt 2003); in Sumer writing and related skills were taught in the tablet house or writing school (Eduba) (Robson 2001). This type of pre-entry, manual skills training would continue well into the nineteenth century. As we shall see in section four, public administration hand- or textbooks had been published in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that a pre-entry and interdisciplinary curriculum was developed by associations of (local) public servants and academics. By way of example, the PA-curriculum at Johns Hopkins in the 1880s and 1890s included courses on politics, economics, history, law, and ethics, but that was eclipsed in the early twentieth century by attention for management, personnel, budgeting, and organizational structure. The Johns Hopkins program also had a significant focus on local government (Hoffman 2002). In the Netherlands it was local functionaries such as municipal secretaries and mayors who developed courses and, in some cases, became professors of public administration (Raadschelders 1998, 17). Contemporary PA-curricula balance to varying degrees this need for a broad background that emphasizes intellectual development on the one hand with the desire for professional and applied training on the other. This expansion of (local) government tasks and services could only happen because of the groundwork laid a century earlier.

3. The changing structural institutional arrangement (SIA) for governing, 1780–1820

The American and French Revolutions prompted fundamental changes in the SIA for governing, and these are best captured using a framework developed by Kiser and Ostrom (1982). They distinguished between constitutional, collective, and operational rules, and that framework has been very useful in describing the changes in the SIA (unless otherwise mentioned, the following is based on Raadschelders 2015, 21–24); and has also been used to show how public administration scholars conceptualize in terms of these three levels (Raadschelders 2003, 386–387). At the constitutional level these were the decades during which people started thinking about the public sphere as that of government, and the private sphere as that of the market. This also meant that the public sphere and its organizations were regarded as separate from other societal institutions (hence, the separation of church and state). In practice politics became the realm for elected officials, while administrative positions were increasingly filled based on educational and experiential knowledge and merit (cf. separation of politics and administration). Finally, the basis of the public and societal spheres came to be enshrined in formal texts, i.e., constitutions, that provided the guardrails for relations between people and rulers as well as for interactions between rulers and their administrative staff.

At the collective, decision-making and organizational, level departmentalization occurred, i.e., the creation of specialized administrative agencies that were organized as bureaucracy with unity of command and a clear line structure. This was very different from the collegial-type organization common for middle and upper management levels in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. From the late eighteenth century on, collegial organization would be limited to those in elective office (and sometimes also to those in judicial office). Equally important was the separation of office from officeholder. That is, public office could no longer be inherited or sold. The practice of selling public office and the existence of sinecure positions (i.e., jobs with salary but no work) is what prompted king George III of England to conduct an inquiry into this practice in 1780 (Cohen 1941, 20). This resulted in a range of public service reforms (Chester 1981, 138).

At the operational, day-to-day, level the most important reform was that of paying civil servants an adequate salary and pension in money. Unto then, part of salary had been paid in food, clothing, housing, and firewood. Also, working in the public sector required not more than one, two, or three days at the most, so salaries of those we nowadays would call appointed officeholders (from blue-collar workers to clerical and administrative personnel) were insufficient. Many had to have two or more jobs to augment the household income. As for pension, until the late eighteenth century the concept of a retirement age with pension was non-existent. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries representatives of various West-European countries established a retirement age with pension (*nota bene*: they agreed on age 65, as average life expectancy in Western Europe was 36!) (Wunder 2000).

As these changes unfolded in a short span of time, it might seem rather sudden, happening in the span of a lifetime. However, they were embedded in changing ideas about the position and role of the ruler and about the position and role of government in society at large and this happened from the late sixteenth, early seventeenth century on.

4. Changing ideas about governing at the societal level, 17th–18th centuries

As mentioned above, historically public servants served the ruler and the ruling elite. They were personal servants, whether helping the ruler to get dressed, taste his food and drink (like many heads of state, the American president has several food tasters in the White House employ), or serving in high administrative office. This thinking about the position and role of bureaucrats in relation to the ruler and about the relation between ruler and people is best captured in two quotes that illustrate how much government was perceived as embodied by and personified in an individual and thus as *patrimonium*. James I, King of England (1603–1625; he was James VI of Scotland, 1567–1603) wrote: “I am the husband and the whole Isle is my lawful wife; I am, the head and it is my body.” (Cohen 1994, 30). Louis XIII, King of France (1601–1643) uttered the famous *L’État c’est moi* usually attributed to his son, Louis XIV (Dyson 1980, 137).

To regard the state and its government as personal property was no longer considered acceptable in the eyes of several political philosophers and theorists at the time. Political philosopher Johan Althusius (1557–1638) argued that public ministers should work on behalf of the population, a universal symbiotic association (Overeem 2014). German scholar Christiaan von Wolf (1679–1754) believed that administrators should be trained in and tested on administration and ought to work for the advancement of the public, common good. What he referred to as the eudaimonic state is better known to us as the welfare state. To him, this required adequate pay and a separation of office from officeholder (Rutgers 2001). Another German political philosopher, Friedrich Carl von Moser (1723–1798) wrote that a ruler needed a skilled, well-functioning, and loyal administration, that administrative office should not be sold, and that ruler-ruled relations ought to be grounded in civil rights (Richter 2014; Schumann 1954, 5).

Against this background it becomes clear that the changes described in the previous section did not come about as a total surprise. Furthermore, these changes had been foreshadowed by changing governing practices at the local level, followed by new ideas about the position and role of local government. Those ideas resulted in a comparative perspective developed in a jail cell.

5. Changing practices of governing at the local level, High Middle Ages

At all times, the laboratory for experiments with policies and services has been local (consider today's policy pilots in various countries). The local level of government is not just the one where people can know one another (up to a point), it is also the one where public officials can know best what people want and need (not necessarily know better), as well as the default SIA when regional and upper-level public institutional arrangements break down. The earliest human settlements were literally local, i.e., the towns and cities of Trypillia in present-day Moldova and Ukraine, existing hundreds of years before the earliest city-states in Mesopotamia (Schlütz et al. 2023). It is at the local level that government emerged, and that some city-states after a while expanded their reach into the hinterlands, building a larger pol-

ity and acquiring a larger tax-base. Some of these towns and cities were governed as self-contained republics with a ruling elite and people as subjects. Other cities were administrative centers in a larger polity or empire. And then there were towns throughout Antiquity and the early to high Middle Ages that had no political and/or legal status, lacking a local administration and part of the property of a feudal Lord (e.g., count, duke, prince, bishop).

I will not speak to what happened at the local level in other parts of the world (Flannery 1998; Hansen 2002; Marcus 1998), but in Western Europe the position and role of local government changed in two phases (unless mentioned otherwise, the following based on Raadschelders 2022). As early as the seventh and eighth centuries some towns acquired rights to hold an annual, and sometimes a weekly, market where farmers could take their produce and livestock and sell it there. Trade at the markets was monitored by local officials so that the local government and the feudal lord received their share. Role and position of local governments in Western Europe changed even more with the emergence of city charters from the second half of the eleventh century on. Northern Italian towns were the first, followed in the twelfth century by local governments in England, France, and the German principalities. The Low Countries' towns started to get city charters in the thirteenth century. These municipal charters provided towns with some degree of autonomy from the feudal lord in return for a share of the taxes collected. Municipal administration included one or more mayors, as well as several aldermen and city council members. They also had a sheriff and a jail, being responsible for "lower jurisdiction." Criminal and capital punishment, which was considered "high jurisdiction," continued to rest with a bailiff and/or feudal lord.

As early as the thirteenth century these municipalities were no longer considered as someone's property. Instead, it was the responsibility of the community that was governed by the local elites. Ambrogio Lorenzetti's frescoes of good and bad government in the town hall of Siena (painted in 1338 CE) portrayed good local government still as a person, but then as an abstracted one that represented the ancient desires for temperance, charity, prudence, hope, magnanimity, and justice (see next section). It is clear from the symbolism in the fresco that the city prospered only when people as citizens collaborated. Local

government exercised oversight and regulated the local economy with an eye on advancing the common good. Local government had become a secular institutional arrangement where people were involved as citizens, although — admittedly — some more involved than others. Local government was still one dominated by the local elites but, because of these city charters (which are, in effect, local constitutions), people were becoming citizens and not just subjects.

Was it the same everywhere? Not quite. Some towns prospered, where others lagged. Siena was one of the four Northwestern European case studies in a recent study of urban citizenship in the past millennium (Prak 2018). From Prak's study as well as from my own study of local government development in the Netherlands in the past four centuries (Raadschelders 1990, 1994) it is clear that local governments were thriving and were the most important and most active level of government with a public workforce to sustain it.

The city of Siena is situated between Florence and Rome in Northern Italy, and the fact that southern Italian towns simply did not achieve such heights of economic development made political economist *avant-la-lettre* Antonio Serra ponder in 1613 (while in jail) why this was the case (2011). Why was his hometown of Naples so poorly developed when compared to its northern Italian counterparts? His answer seems so common-sensical, but that is only so in retrospect. In its day his insights were nothing short of revolutionary, although only possible because of the changes in the preceding centuries, and not recognized for their prescient qualities until the later eighteenth century. Serra recognized that one could do very little about what he called “proper” accidents that included weather patterns, fertility of the land, and other natural conditions. What was subject to human intervention were “common” accidents of which he mentioned four: a diversified economy (i.e., not one dependent upon one product or one type of products), good connecting networks that would facilitate trade, an enterprising (thus: educated) population, and ... good “effective government — which [...] is the controlling superior cause of all the other accidents, for it can organize, introduce, cause, improve, and preserve” (2011 [1613], 249) the people.

Serra's ideas fitted the *Zeitgeist* as several of his contemporaries, such as Johan Althusius, Hugo Grotius, Giovanni Botero, and Jean

Bodin, made similar remarks in their writing. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries several authors would subscribe to this idea of government as a welfare-enhancing institution. Among them the first authors of public administration textbooks (e.g. Veit Ludvig von Seckendorff in the middle of the seventeenth century; Nicolas de la Mare in the early eighteenth century; Christian von Wolff in the middle of the eighteenth century; as well as economist Adam Smith in the late eighteenth century).

Almost two centuries before Adam Smith, Serra observed that people should be protected from cheating public officials, that government should advance the common good, that government had the clout to invest in material and social infrastructure, and that those who govern should do so for all people and not for their personal desires. This latter issue has roots deep in Antiquity.

6. Training and education of bureaucrats and civil servants, roots in antiquity

In the previous section those ancient ideals of temperance, charity, prudence, hope, magnanimity, righteousness, and justice were mentioned. In the literatures of ancient China, Egypt, India, and Mesopotamia various references can be found about what was expected of rulers and their officers (for detail see Raadschelders 2020a). It is this instruction or wisdom literature that contains recommendations about appropriate behavior toward the people. Some were written as advice to the ruler (think, e.g., of Machiavelli's *The Prince*), others were written as a letter from father to son when the latter was expected to take over dad's job. An illustrative listing of these include: "be not boastful, be humble, be righteous, be equitable," "to the doer do cause that he do" (in my view, the earliest example of the Golden Rule), "be a dam for the sufferer" (i.e., protect the weak), be not covetous of someone else's property or success (consider the Mosaic tenth commandment), be patient, be just, do not punish wrongfully, do not judge on the basis of social rank but on someone's work, share with the needy, do not pursue material desires only, etc. (for these admonitions and various others in the ancient Middle East see: Pritchard 1969).

It is important to note that these ideals do not originate in one specific part of the world; they “emerged” wherever local communities became imagined communities in need of a government. These ideals are still considered important for those working in the public sector (see epigram of Hegel at the beginning of this chapter). But, as societies in the ancient world became larger in terms of population, advice about behavioral practices for rulers and their officials was no longer sufficient. Those working as subordinate administrators also had to become proficient in administrative techniques. Attention for that started in ancient China in the fourth century BCE. Is it not interesting to know that chancellor of the Han state, Shen Buhai (351–337 BCE), advised to use performance records and merit ratings as a means for the ruler to control officials and ministers (Creel 1964; 1970)? Added to this, in the eyes of political philosopher Han-fei-tzu toward the end of the fourth century BCE, civil servants should pay much attention to the role and rule of law (Creel 1970, 122). Administrative techniques and rule of law are still important but not sufficient when it comes to governing.

Looking back, training and education of bureaucrats started in Antiquity with behavioral advice, was augmented with attention for administrative techniques, and further supplemented with deep understanding of the rule of law. This would be the standard package until the early modern age. As we have seen in earlier sections, from the seventeenth century on people started thinking about widening the scope and range of government, from the late eighteenth century on developing the SIA needed to support such growth of public services and tasks, and from the late nineteenth century governments actually doing what had been suggested before: being an administrative state that takes care of many things that people as collective can no longer care for upon their own initiative.

7. Civil service and servants: backbone of democracy for citizens

At the beginning of this chapter several questions were raised. When did the role of civil servants start to shift from serving elites only to serving people and their representatives? What have career civil ser-

vants under democracy contributed to government and governance capacity? Was there a “golden age” of civil service? Are the days of an influential career civil service gone? Have the position and role of career civil servants been hollowed-out in democracies?

The first question is easy to answer: around the 1800s in Western Europe. In the course of nineteenth century career civil servants embraced their new role as is evidenced by their efforts at developing new policies and services as well as developing programs to train and educate the next generation of civil servants. How important they had become for society and government was recognized early on. In 1900, Frank Goodnow observed that the “execution of law [...] depends in large degree upon the active initiative of the administrative authorities.” (Goodnow 1900, 15, 44). More than four decades later Wayne Leys wrote that legislators write general public policy, while “administrators make detailed rules and plans of action.” (Leys 1943, 10). It is because of expert knowledge, organizational memory, and longevity in office that career civil servants could become the most important support to democracy. And they are still! However, it is worthwhile to quote the British political scientist Edward C. Page:

Perhaps the biggest danger for democracy is not a civil service putting forward proposals which a minister feels forced to accept, but rather that ministers do not notice or fully appreciate what is being proposed in their name despite having the political authority to change it and a civil service which bends over backwards to consult and accommodate them. (Page 2003, 651)

Career civil servants have worked consistently to improve the lives of people. As I have mentioned at various times: politicians have learned how to kiss babies, civil servants change the diapers. People as citizens know very little about what government and their civil servants do for them on a daily basis. Furthermore, what they know about what civil servants do is not appreciated or overshadowed by general distrust of bureaucracy. Just think back what life and society were like more than a century ago, how people lived, how little support they had. The government has become a key social actor working

for people at large. It is the career civil service that has made that possible. Their role and position in government expanded in the course of the twentieth century. Given their importance in democracy, it is baffling to see that some in political office have come to question the position and role of the civil service in the large scheme of things. On what basis is that position and role questioned? Surely not based on facts, but rather based on a deeply embedded collective memory of distrusting bureaucrats. However, the historical bureaucracy serving power only no longer exists. Instead, it is a civil service bureaucracy that provides services, proposes and details policies, writes draft regulations and legislation, and supports elected officeholders, even those who question their integrity.

What started as bureaucrat bashing in the 1980s, was quickly augmented with the idea that the public sector should model its functioning after the example of the private sector, championed in the ludicrous notion of New Public Management that performance not only ought to be managed but also measured. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with assuring that taxpayers' moneys are well and accountably spent. There is nothing wrong with looking out for efficiency, effectiveness, and economy ... as long as it does not drown out the equally important need for due process, fairness, equity, and democracy. There is something wrong when the nature of the public sector is misunderstood: it is not profit — but benefit — driven. Are we focusing too much on performance measures, and sacrificing accountability on the altar of performance (see Savoie in this volume)? Also, let us not forget that not only was government the single large-scale organization for millennia (possibly with exception of a centralized religious organization such as the Catholic Church), but it also served as example to private organizations for how they could structure work under the growth of standardized production. The whole idea nowadays that government should learn from the private sector is ridiculous.

In this chapter I have shown how the position and role of career civil servants are rooted in developments of thought and practice over time and emphasized that local government has played a pivotal role in these. If there is a golden age of civil service, it must be since the late nineteenth century. In fact, the importance of their work, whether

as street-level or as policy-bureaucrats, has only increased since then. They are more important than ever. The problem is that people do not realize that. What people are also not aware of is that some who aspire to hold or are elected in political office pursue politics for the sheer desire of power. Politics for policy and people has taken a backseat in the rhetoric of populists in many democracies who seek to replace a merit-based civil service with loyal subordinates (Raadschelders & Sanders 2025). Be warned of leaders who seek power and want a civil service that is loyal to them, not loyal to the people and their Constitution. And, be warned of unelected and unappointed self-styled megalomaniacs who circumvent the guardrails of democracy while supported by the elected top executive leader. Who knows that the German word for leader is *Führer*? Is that what we want? Was Aldous Huxley too cynical when saying that:

The greater part of the population is not very intelligent, dreads responsibility, and desires nothing better than to be told what to do. Provided the rulers do not interfere with its material comforts and its cherished beliefs, it is perfectly happy to let itself be ruled (Huxley 1962).

People as citizens can continue to rely on all that career civil servants do, but only when the latter's role is not hollowed out by politicians who play upon fears and prejudices. To assure that those politicians do not get away with that, we simply need the kind of education in civics that has been proposed by the Educating for American Democracy project (EAD 2021). We need the career civil service more than ever and can no longer take democracy and their loyal support for granted. The study of public administration has most certainly a role to play in this (Yesilkagit 2021).

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2



The UK civil service then and now

**The numbers, the bargains
and the blunders**

CHRISTOPHER HOOD AND RUTH DIXON

1. Introduction

THIS CHAPTER EXPLORES THREE QUESTIONS relating to the development and operation of the UK civil service from 1945 to the 2020s, namely:

- What happened to the size and shape of the civil service over that period? What difference did successive reform efforts, restructurings and cutbacks make to the overall numbers and to the balance between higher and lower-level officials?
- What happened to the traditional “public service bargain” in the UK, in which civil servants offered serial loyalty to the governments of the day and government ministers refrained from hiring and firing civil servants at will? Writing at a time when some UK Cabinet ministers openly spoke of a need to crack down on “woke activists” in the civil service who those ministers saw as trying to obstruct government policy,¹ with ministerial efforts to “blame down” being countered by civil servants attempting to “blame up,” should we conclude that that traditional bargain had been abandoned by the end of our period?
- What happened to the perceived outputs of the system? Is there any reason to suppose that government “blunders” and policy fiascos in Whitehall were more or less in evidence between then and now, and what can we say about any changes that might have occurred in levels of public trust in government in general and the civil service in particular, as between earlier post-war decades and the end of the period covered by this book?

These questions matter and indeed they go to the heart of debates about the quality of bureaucracy in modern government, but they are

easier to pose than to answer. There is no single knockout indicator that can provide a definitive verdict, so our analysis here follows the principle of “consilience” (Whewell 1847) by drawing on three different sources of information relating to continuity or change, namely administrative statistics, such opinion poll data as are available over the period, official publications and selected secondary accounts of the working of the government machine over that time.

2. Civil service SIZE AND SHAPE — then and now

At the beginning of our period, the end of World War II, the number of UK civil servants had blown out to over a million — tiny compared to (say) India or China today, but gigantic by comparison with the 16,000 or so identified a century or so before by the famous 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan report on the civil service, and even by the 100,000 civil servants working in the government machine during World War I (Duggett 1997, 5). Around half of that million were so-called “industrial” civil servants, mostly operating manufacturing plants and physical facilities such as ordnance factories and naval dockyards, but there were also half a million “non-industrial” civil servants engaged in providing public services and developing and applying policies (Civil Service Statistics 1970, 4). Numbers of industrial civil servants fell sharply after 1945, as part of a squeeze in civil service numbers far bigger in absolute terms than occurred in any subsequent government to date (including that of Margaret Thatcher), and went on falling until that industrial designation was finally abolished in 2008. By contrast, the size of the 1945 non-industrial civil service was hardly different from that of today, even though the UK population grew by about 40 per cent over that period. Those non-industrial civil service staff numbers dipped for a while below 400,000 in the mid-2010s but had again reached 500,000 by the end of 2023.²

Moving from size to shape, the non-industrial civil service of 1945 was itself sharply divided into multiple “classes” of officials doing different types of work, with administrative, executive and clerical classes created in the nineteenth century and scientific and professional classes added on in the 1930s and 1940s. The administrative class, as reorganised by Sir Warren Fisher in the 1930s, was said to epitomise

the “cult of the generalist,” an elite cadre of policy advisers at the top of the service (Fry 1986, 541). The elaborate civil service classificatory structure, laboriously developed over a century and intended “to promote common standards and a sense of unity among all those who did similar work in different departments” (Fulton 1968, 65) was simplified and consolidated into broader grades from the 1960s, and the loaded term “administrative class” was itself dropped. But the underlying pattern, of a relatively small go-anywhere policymaking elite of high-flyers and fast-streamers working with ministers and gaining experience and promotion from a rapid succession of postings in hot-button areas across different departments, by no means disappeared and frequently figured in criticisms of the civil service elite as shallow and amateurish in the 1950s and 1960s (see in particular Balogh 1959). Such criticisms perhaps reached their peak in the 1968 Fulton Report on the Civil Service, commissioned by an ex-civil servant Prime Minister (Harold Wilson) who was highly sceptical about the “all-rounder” ethos (Duggett 1997, 7).

Three major changes observable in the UK civil service structure over the period from “then” (the mid-1940s) to “now” (the 2020s) are: the weakening of what was once a sharp distinction between “temporary” and “established” staff; the removal of explicit discrimination against women; and a notable growth in the policymaking elite group of civil servants relative to those further down the bureaucratic food chain.

- a) **Temporary and permanent staff.** Back in the 1940s, there was a key dividing line between “established” (permanent) and “unestablished” (temporary) staff. Those temporary staff were lower paid, had less leave and worse promotion prospects, could be fired at will, and were not eligible for pensions (Civil Service Statistics 1972, 3). Almost all of the staff hired during World War II had this designation such that by the start of our period in the mid-1940s around three-quarters of the civil service were temporaries (Civil Service Statistics 1970, 8). Some tens of thousands of those wartime temporaries became “established” in the early post-war period (through departmental selection or competitive examinations), but many were dismissed or resigned as peacetime working resumed (Royal Commission on the Civil Service 1955, 123). By 1955 the proportion of temporary

staff had dropped to around the pre-war level of 25 per cent but it was not until the 1970s that a new civil service pension scheme eliminated non-pensionable posts (Civil Service Statistics 1972, 3).³

- b) **Explicit discrimination against women.** Following protests about summary dismissals of temporary female civil servants which had marked the return to peacetime working conditions after World War I, women had been able to enter the civil service recruitment exams on the same basis as men since the 1920s. But the appointments following female candidates' entrance exam performance were plainly not made on the same basis as the men.⁴ At the beginning of our period there was an explicit difference between male and female pay scales, with the maximum rate for women generally set at 80 per cent of the male rate for the same grade. These pay differentials persisted until the 1960s (Civil Service Department 1971, 1). Indeed, at the very start of our period, female civil servants who married were expected to resign, receiving a marriage gratuity based on length of service. That "marriage bar" was formally removed in 1946, but at that time most female civil servants still resigned when they married or had children. If a married female civil servant wished to return to the service, she had to refund her marriage gratuity and would be appointed to an entry-level grade regardless of her previous seniority (Civil Service Department 1971, 27–30).
- c) **The explosive growth of the policymaking elite in the civil service.** A third stark difference between "then" and "now" is the remarkable growth of the elite policy-making corps over the period, a development which is compatible with Patrick Dunleavy's "bureau-shaping" theory that the working of bureaucratic politics tends to lead to growth in high-level policy units rather than in less glamorous administrative work down the line (Dunleavy 1991; see also Hood et al. 2023, 159–60). In 1955, the administrative class (the top civil servants from Assistant Principal up to Permanent Secretary (the official at the head of each government department) numbered some 2,500, a number which itself had doubled during World War II (Royal Commission on the Civil Service 1955, 3). This group

corresponds approximately to today's Senior Civil Service (scs) plus Grades 6 and 7.⁵ While some senior members of other classes would now have been included, this number is dwarfed by the 7,400 scs and 75,000 Grade 6/7 officials in 2023, comprising an “elite” of more than 80,000.⁶

Figure 2.1



Figure 2.1: Grade structure and percentage of women in the non-industrial civil service: 1996 and 2023 compared. Abbreviations: SCS, Senior Civil Service; SEO/HEO, Senior/Higher Executive Officer; EO, Executive Officer; AO/AA, Administrative Officer/Assistant. Calculated from (Civil Service Statistics 1997 and 2023).

Figure 2.1 shows that both the expansion of the upper levels of the civil service and the near-equalizing of the proportion of women across all grades are relatively recent developments, mostly dating from the mid-1990s. At the time of writing women comprised almost half of the top levels (scs and Grades 6/7), compared with 8 per cent of the administrative class in 1955 (itself an increase on 4 per cent in 1939) (Civil Service Statistics 2023; Royal Commission on the Civil Service 1955, 92; Royal Commission on Equal Pay 1946, 10).⁷

Finally, while socioeconomic diversity is difficult to assess, there are some reasons for believing that the 2020s civil service was rather less “working-class” than it had been in 1945 in some important ways. While it is true that the expansion of university education meant that graduates in the 2020s came from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds, the converse is that jobs that were open to school leavers in the 1940s often required a degree in the later period. For instance, most executive officers — previously recruited as school-leavers — had a post-18 qualification in the 2020s.⁸

Those expectations are consistent with a 2021 report of a survey of some 300,000 UK civil servants by the Social Mobility Commission (SMC). As reported by the BBC, the survey found that top Whitehall officials were “even posher today than in the 1960s,” with almost three-quarters of those in senior posts having parents in professional or managerial occupations compared to two-thirds in 1967 (Easton 2021). Less than a fifth of senior civil servants in 2021 had parents who had either never worked or who had jobs such as drivers, cleaners, receptionists or mechanics. This proportion was the same as in 1967, despite pleas from the Fulton report onwards that recruitment should be widened and processes made fairer to candidates from all backgrounds (Fulton 1968, 28,160). Further, officials from less advantaged backgrounds reported that they experienced barriers to career progression (Social Mobility Commission 2021).

Though the SMC’s figures only go back to the 1960s, the apparent persistence and accentuation of such class biases in the upper grades of the civil service may have unintentionally made the 2020s UK civil service workplace a less cognitively and educationally diverse setting than that of the 1940s. Even leaving aside the obvious issues of social justice raised by such a pattern, the combined effect of the huge expansion of numbers in those senior grades together with the outsourcing or disappearance from the workplace of lower-level support jobs (such as messengers and typists, for instance) might be expected to increase the risk of policy fiascos or blunders resulting from civil service “groupthink,” an issue to which we return shortly.

3. Public service bargains: DITCHING the traditional loyalty-for-tenure pattern?

Writing in the middle of the period covered by this book, both Henry Parris (1969) and (more explicitly) Bernard Schaffer (1973) saw the development of the UK civil service bureaucracy from the nineteenth to the twentieth century as reflecting an implicit or putative constitutional “bargain.” Under this supposed bargain, the elite corps of the civil service came to enjoy permanent or indefinite tenure in exchange for serial loyalty to their ministers and the elected government of the

day but otherwise did not take sides in electoral competition among political parties, observing “purdah” during election periods.⁹

Sharply contrasting with the party-spoils approach that developed to staffing the higher levels of the federal bureaucracy in the United States from the early nineteenth century, that serial loyalty was construed to include confidentiality about interactions between ministers and civil servants (such as warnings, briefings or other forms of advice). Some of the restrictions even applied to behaviour after leaving the civil service (such as the obligation to notify and consult the government of the day before publication (in memoirs, for example) of “any information obtained by virtue of their official positions” (House of Commons Public Administration Committee 2006, 24–25).

The bargain also extended to willingness to work for ministers in developing policies with which those civil servants disagreed and the avoidance of public criticism of government policies.¹⁰ In 1948 Prime Minister Clement Attlee declared pointedly: “we always demand from our civil servants a loyalty to the State, and that they should serve the Government of the day, whatever its political colour” (quoted in Fry 1986, 540). Among the corresponding benefits civil servants gained from this implicit bargain were permanent or indefinite tenure, the award of honours and privileges of various kinds, eligibility for generous non-contributory retirement pensions at a relatively early age (60) together with the ability (subject to some restrictions over gamekeeper-to-poacher career moves) to take up well-rewarded second careers after leaving the civil service.

Both Parris and Schaffer laid stress on the subtlety of this supposed public service bargain. They saw it as implicit or “constructive” rather than formally enacted, fuzzy round the edges and long in the making. It was certainly breached on occasion, for instance in a dramatic moment in 1909 when the then Permanent Secretary to the Treasury (Sir George Murray) openly canvassed members of the House of Lords to reject his own Chancellor’s “People’s budget” but remained in post (see O’Donnell 2005; Maclean 2009). And the bargain arguably disappeared into the background during World War II, when government was constituted as a grand coalition, with no general elections for six years of war (indeed a whole decade between the general elec-

tions of 1935 and 1945), only by-elections that were not contested among the three political parties which formed the wartime coalition.

Further, the centralised system of recruitment for the top-level administrative class of the civil service, involving rigorous examinations to select the best and brightest (a process borrowed from the East India Company, which in turn took it from imperial China) was abandoned in World War II. As already mentioned, almost all recruitment to the wartime civil service was on a temporary basis and conducted department by department through what Madge McKinney (1949, 345) euphemistically described as “a patriotic kind of nepotism.” According to McKinney, the reduced rigour in competition for places in the civil service meant that by 1945 there was a substantial amount of dead wood in the civil service just at a time when the incoming Labour government’s ambitious plans for developing the post-war welfare state called for high-level administrative talent.¹¹

With the resumption of peacetime politics, the Schafferian bargain arguably came back into focus, and indeed perhaps reached its zenith in 1954, when in the famous “Crichel Down” case a senior minister (Sir Thomas Dugdale) resigned over a catalogue of errors and bad faith over land compulsorily acquired by the Air Ministry for bombing practice in 1938 and the subsequent breach of an undertaking to give the owners a chance to buy it back after World War II. This result was plainly the fault of Dugdale’s officials (Stanley 2024, 14–15), and was a key contribution to pressure for the creation of a Scandinavian-style Ombudsman (which occurred in the following decade) to challenge instances of civil service maladministration by means other than costly and often lengthy court proceedings. The incoming Attlee government after World War II also chose, temporarily at least, to build back the pre-war system of centralized merit appointment of the elite-corps administrative class on the basis of traditional exams.

Indeed, Geoffrey Fry (1986, 537) argues that the expansion of the welfare state from the 1940s to the 1970s meant that the higher reaches of the civil service gained extra influence over this period as subsequent governments, both Labour and Conservative, relied on senior officials to design and manage increasingly complex welfare state activity and a large state-owned enterprise sector. For Fry, it was not until the economically liberal Conservative government of Margaret

Thatcher came to power in 1979 with a pledge to “deprivilege the civil service” (Hood 1995) that the dominance of the civil service came under serious challenge and “these [top civil service] advisers found themselves advising a government which ... did not feel the need for their advice.” But the “deprivileging” rhetoric of that government did not altogether match its actions: while that rhetoric challenged the elite civil service, it was the industrial civil service that was cut by 26 per cent between 1979 and 1984, against a 10 per cent cut in the non-industrial service (Fry 1986, 539; Hood 1995, 103–5). The elite grades (today’s senior civil service) fell by some 12 per cent over the same period but were almost back to their 1979 levels by the time Margaret Thatcher resigned in 1990, and have continued to grow almost uninterrupted since then (Civil Service Statistics, annual editions).

As already noted, in the 1950s and 1960s the competency of the civil service came under political attack, with critics claiming that the traditional approach to recruitment was linked to a cult of amateurism. A high-level inquiry into the civil service at that time (the Fulton committee) led to the disappearance of the old-style “class” system — at least in name — and aimed to strengthen rather than weaken the civil service by increasing its professionalism. The measures it recommended for doing so included the establishment of a Civil Service Department (“to fight, and to be seen to be fighting, the Treasury on behalf of the Service” (Fulton 1968, 82) and the creation of a Civil Service College to professionalise the training of elite civil servants along similar lines to the French ENA (*Ecole Nationale d’Administration*). Both of these recommendations were accepted and implemented but arguably fell well short of the lofty aspirations of the Committee. A Civil Service Department was duly created, but it lasted little more than a decade before being summarily abolished in 1981 after a civil service pay strike, with its head “despatched to early retirement and the House of Lords” (Hood 1995, 103). The Civil Service College set up in accordance with the Fulton Committee’s recommendations went through various makeovers, restructurings and re-namings (as the Centre for Management and Policy Studies and later the National School for Government) before it was finally scrapped in 2012, but arguably never provided training of a similar calibre to that of the ENA (Fry 1986, 551).

As for the loyalty part of the Schafferian public service bargain — permanent tenure in office in exchange for loyalty to “the government of the day, whatever its political colour” in the words of Clement Attlee quoted earlier — that element of the bargain arguably weakened or at least became more complicated over the following decades, in at least three ways. One was the explicit creation in 1964 of a (formally recognised) politically partisan group of civil servants (Special Advisers or “SpAds”), intended to contribute to greater political responsiveness of the civil service and consequently appointed on a party-spoils basis with limited tenure (that is, contracted to serve only during the term of their sponsoring ministers). When the new system was first set up, there were only a handful of Special Advisers. But by the end of our period there were nearly 120 of them (a figure not so very far short of the 160 or so political civil servants in the German federal government). From those small beginnings the SpAd system crossed several contentious boundaries in later decades, as SpAds became able to direct regular civil servants and as “super-SpAds” (chiefs of staff) began to direct, hire and fire other SpAds.

A second complicating development came in the form of institutional creations which involved civil or public servants operating as autonomous, publicly visible, actors at arms-length from ministers rather than serving as those ministers’ anonymous back-room servants, on a variety of types of tenure. One prominent example is the National Audit Office, revamped in the early 1980s from a semi-executive, semi-parliamentary body created in the nineteenth century (the Exchequer and Audit Department) into a fully autonomous audit agency directly reporting to the powerful House of Commons Public Accounts Committee and headed by an official (the Comptroller and Auditor General) who is appointed by Parliament with judicial-type tenure and no fixed retirement age. In similar vein, in the second half of our period (2007), the power to certify, kitemark and regulate official statistics was taken out of direct control by Treasury ministers into an arms-length body reporting to parliament alone (following widespread criticism of gaming of official statistics in the New Labour years). The same went for the removal of fiscal forecasting and reporting from control by Treasury ministers into the hands of an independent Office for Budgetary Responsibility in 2010 (replacing a

much-criticised earlier arrangement in which the National Audit Office was handed the unenviable task of certifying the “reasonableness” of the slippery assumptions underlying Treasury fiscal forecasts). Further, in the 1980s and 1990s a new group of arms-length regulators was created to set pricing limits and service standards for what had formerly been a large set of state-owned enterprises providing utilities (such as telecoms, water, railways), with many of those regulators drawn from academic or business backgrounds, and serving for fixed-but-renewable rather than indefinite terms.

A third development cutting across that traditional Schafferian bargain, beginning in the late 1980s and coming into prominence in the following decade, was the “agencification” of numerous executive delivery-type functions (such as running prisons, operating border controls, issuing passports or driving licences) into organizations run at arms-length from ministerial departments, on the grounds that such arrangements provided more scope for creative and business-like management than would apply if the functions in question were run under direct day-to-day ministerial control.¹² Those “executive agencies” were run by civil servants on fixed terms rather than on indefinite contracts, who could be more generously paid than regular career civil servants — and also, perhaps more importantly, could be sacked by ministers when the blame politics ran hot for delivery failures. After a politically damaging high-profile public row in the mid-1990s between the then Home Secretary (Michael Howard, “blaming down”) and the head of the Prison Service Agency (Derek Lewis, “blaming up”) over who was responsible for escapes from a high-security prison in the Isle of Wight (Barker 1998), government enthusiasm for executive agencies waned, and such agencies were reined back by the subsequent Labour government, on the grounds that they undercut the operation of “joined-up government”. But moves away from the jobs-for-life Schafferian bargain continued, notably in the introduction of fixed-term contracts for Permanent Secretaries in 2015, following a move that had taken place in Australia and New Zealand several decades before.

A final institutional/constitutional change affecting that putative Schafferian loyalty-for-tenure public service bargain came in the 1990s with the creation of elected parliaments and assemblies in Scotland

and Wales (but not England) and a consociational power-sharing arrangement introduced in Northern Ireland to bridge the unionist/nationalist divide. While Northern Ireland had had its own separate civil service under the control of a devolved government since the 1920s, the same did not apply to Scotland and Wales. While officials serving the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales formally continued to be UK civil servants at the time of writing, the political reality was rather different and there were some obvious potential conflict-of-interest issues for those notionally UK officials when it came to policies of separation and independence pursued by nationalist parties in those governments, notably with a highly-contested Scottish independence referendum in 2014.

Overall, those various then-and-now changes in the Schafferian public service bargain might be seen as reflecting the development of a more abrasive style of politics over the civil service bureaucracy, with continuing examples of career politicians aiming to “blame down” and officials to “blame up” for slip-ups and fiascos.¹³ Perhaps those blaming-down episodes represent some kind of milder UK equivalent to the rhetorical stance of those US Presidents (such as Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan or Donald Trump) whose campaigning style was to present themselves as outsiders running against the claimed inertia and political bias of the “deep state” bureaucracy and to portray that bureaucratic machine as the central problem rather than the solution to society’s ills (Tonks 2024). It is hard to imagine right-of-centre UK incumbent ministers and their acolytes in the 1940s and 1950s talking publicly about the civil service in the way that was commonly reported in the 2020s (for example, with the civil service dubbed as “the Blob,” “snowflakes,” or “wokerati” trying to undermine government policies). At the very least the language seems to have coarsened over our period.

4. Outputs: Blunders of governments then and now — nothing new?

A decade or so ago Sir Ivor Crewe and the late Anthony King published a much-acclaimed analysis of “blunders” committed by UK governments over the previous three decades, defining a blunder as

“a gross mistake; an error due to stupidity or carelessness” (King and Crewe 2013). They focused on twelve case studies, ranging from the botched attempt to replace the traditional local property tax with a poll tax in the late 1980s, through the UK’s ignominious exit from the EU Exchange Rate Mechanism in the 1990s, to Tax Credits and Individual Learning Accounts in the 2000s. King and Crewe saw such blunders as partially caused by the limited life-experience of the politicians and officials who developed the policies in question (for example in their unfamiliarity with the way of life of those on welfare benefits leading to major flaws in the design of the tax credits system in the early New Labour years) combined with a lack of effective challenge inside the government machine.¹⁴

What is not clear from that study is whether there is anything very new about government blunders *à la* Crewe and King. There is no real metric for a “blunder count” over time; indeed, King and Crewe (2013, 25) are careful to point out that there are numerous earlier cases occurring before the period covered by their book. But it only takes a casual scan of policy mis-steps in the 1940s and 1950s to provide some fairly strong circumstantial evidence of Crewe and King-type blunders over that period. Some possible cases in point include: the disastrous mishandling of coal supply in the winter of 1947; the spectacular failure of the 1947–51 Tanganyika groundnut cultivation scheme; the enthusiasm for mass high-rise social housing from the 1940s to the 1970s; the thalidomide disaster (some 2000 babies born with birth defects) resulting from the failure of drug approval machinery over a drug introduced in 1953 to treat morning sickness in pregnant women; and the unwillingness of the Attlee government to draw on the successful experience of the network of military hospitals and health service in drawing up its post-election 1945 plans for the New National Health Service.¹⁵

The difficulty with all such cases, of course, lies in establishing the extent to which misjudgement, groupthink or incompetence on the part of the civil service was responsible for such blunders as opposed to poor judgement or other failings on the part of elected politicians and ministers.

5. Public satisfaction with government and belief in civil service veracity over time

Such UK polling data as can be found for the whole period from 1945 to the present day indicates a clear decline in public satisfaction with “government” (not distinguishing ministers and civil servants) over that period. Figure 2.2 compares responses to an almost identically worded question about public perceptions of government performance in monthly Gallup and Ipsos polls in the 1945–70 period as against that of 2000 to 2020 (Pack 2022; Ipsos 2024). As can be seen, net satisfaction immediately after World War II was often positive, that is, more people were satisfied than dissatisfied. But as time went on, those positive ratings became more rare, with net satisfaction since 2000 only occasionally going above zero for a month or two, usually after a General Election.

Figure 2.2

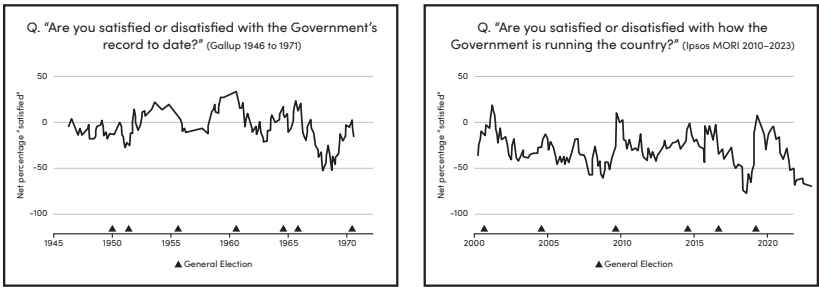


Figure 2.2: Public satisfaction with Government, 1946–2023. Calculated from (Pack 2022, Ipsos 2024).

But against the picture that Figure 2.2 paints, of long-term decline in public satisfaction with government over our period, other polls, using different wording and covering different time periods, indicate little change or even an increase in public trust in, and satisfaction with, the civil service. For example, World Values Survey polling of UK residents showed almost no change in “confidence in the civil service” from 1981 to 2008, with about 45 per cent of respondents indicating confidence throughout that period.

Further, as shown in Figure 2.3, a strikingly different picture is painted by an Ipsos survey series posing questions as to how far respondents trusted various players (of which “civil servants” were one) “to tell the truth” (Ipsos 2024).¹⁶ These data are available only from the early 1980s, and there was no polling on this question between 1983 and 1993, but subsequent iterations of responses to this question indicate a striking upward trend in trusting civil servants to tell the truth over the 2010s, peaking at some 65 per cent in 2020 before dropping back in the COVID era.¹⁷ Clearly, subtle differences in the wording of survey questions can make a substantial difference to the conclusions to be drawn about levels and changes in public trust of the civil service.

Figure 2.3

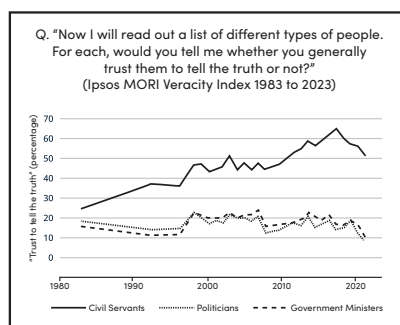


Figure 2.3: Public trust in civil servants, politicians, and ministers, 1983–2023. Calculated from Veracity Index (Ipsos 2024).

6. Summary and conclusion: What we know and what we know we don't know

We posed three questions at the outset of this chapter, namely (a) what happened to the size and shape of the UK civil service over the period since 1945? (b) what happened to the traditional “public service bargain” over the period? (c) what change, if any, is observable in the quality of governance over that period?

What happened to the size and shape of the civil service?

While the overall staff size of the UK's (non-industrial) civil service in the 2020s was not greatly different to what it had been in the 1940s, it was vastly more female, more highly-educated and probably (data is fragmentary) less working-class than its equivalent of eight decades before. UK governments in the 2020s had much more civil service brain power to draw on than their 1940s equivalents, at least in the sense of formally-accredited analytic capacity (university degrees and higher degrees) while what had once been a large army of industrial civil servants and lower-level support staff dwindled as a result of outsourcing and digital-age developments.

What happened to the traditional public service bargain of serial loyalty to ministers in exchange for permanence?

The putative bargain in which UK civil servants offered serial loyalty to whatever party or parties formed the elected government of the day in exchange for permanence and other benefits — sharply contrasting with the US party-spoils tradition for higher-level public service appointments — by no means disappeared. But some other public service bargains grew up around it, including the explicit recognition of a small politically partisan civil service from the 1960s, and the emergence or growth of new types of civil servants — such as arms-length regulators for privatized utilities from the 1980s and other “gamekeeper” roles, for example in fiscal reporting/forecasting and statistical kitemarking from the 2000s.

What change, if any, is observable in the quality of governance or civil service operations?

Data on the quality of government over eight decades — and specifically on the positive or negative contribution made by the civil service to the quality of governance — are at best fragmentary and hard to interpret. Indicators such as the observable growth of complaints to central and local Ombudsmen about decisions made by government (Hood and Dixon 2015, 140–3), or the increase in requests for formal “directions” by Permanent Secretaries in publicly disowning spending proposals made by ministers that they consider to violate official value-for-money criteria (Hood et al. 2023, 123), are available

for only part of the period (they were not fully reported until the 1990s) and can be interpreted in more than one way (for instance as evidence of rising expectations or of falling quality of governance).

As we showed earlier, such then-and-now polling data as is available for the 1940s as against the more recent past clearly indicates a non-trivial drop in public trust and satisfaction with “government” as a whole, and politicians and ministers remained among the least-trusted categories of people covered by such surveys throughout the period. But polls mounted on the veracity of “civil servants” suggest *increasing* public trust in those actors in recent decades as against a drop in trust of politicians and ministers. As for government policy fiascos or blunders as highlighted by King and Crewe’s best-seller, casual observation would suggest that such fiascos are not just a phenomenon of the recent past. Until such casual observation can be replaced by careful historical analysis and workable metrics developed for establishing a “blunder count” over time, a Scottish not-proven verdict would seem to be called for here. The notion of the UK civil service as having enjoyed some sort of golden age of competence and respect in the early post-war period, before nose-diving into a harsh and dystopian era of political chaos, mutual blaming and vanishing respect, however beguiling, does not seem to fit with all the available evidence.

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NOTES

1. See for instance Smith 2023; Hazell 2024.
2. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/civil-service-staff-numbers>
3. It might be noted that the terms and conditions of civil service work in the 1940s would not be considered generous today: officials were expected to work a five-and-a-half-day week with hours only partly relaxed from the "emergency" levels of 51 hours per week introduced during the war (Royal Commission on the Civil Service 1955, 51). Part-time work was not permitted in the administrative and executive classes, with rare exceptions.
4. A wartime Royal Commission calculated that if women had been appointed in proportion to their civil service entry exam performance between 1930 and 1939, 7 rather than 4 per cent of the administrative class would have been female, and 27 rather than 6 per cent of the executive class (Royal Commission on Equal Pay 1946, 10).
5. Given the multitude of different grades and classes in the 1940s and 50s, the structure of the whole civil service then and now is hard to compare for that era. Comparisons are more meaningful for the period after a unified grading system was introduced in the 1980s, and especially after the SCS was created in 1996 (Civil Service Statistics 1996, 10).
6. By comparison the UK population grew by a third since 1950 and the number of salaried politicians rose by some 30 per cent after the creation of the devolved parliaments in the 1990s (Hood and Dixon 2015, 25).
7. Ethnic minority and disability statuses of civil servants were not even recorded until the mid-1980s but the Institute for Government's (2024) *Whitehall Monitor* shows upward trends since 2003 in the proportions of civil servants from ethnic minorities and of staff with disabilities both in the service as a whole and at senior levels.
8. <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/job-profiles/civil-service-executive-officer>
9. Indeed, civil servants who choose to stand for election to parliament are required by Order in Council to resign their posts on announcing their candidature.
10. For a fuller discussion of types of public service bargains, see Hood and Lodge (2006).
11. On top of the loss-of-quality problem, McKinney (1949, 346–7) notes that by 1945 many of those temporary wartime appointees were in the wrong place in the government machine, in that the military civil service establishment was heavily

overstaffed for peacetime conditions, while the home services part of the bureaucracy was correspondingly understaffed for developing post-war plans for extending the welfare state.

12. A rationale very similar to the case that was made for operating the industries nationalized by the Attlee government after World War II as arms-length statutory boards overseeing commercial-type managers rather than ministerial departments.

13. A case in point at the time of writing was the dismissal in early 2024 of David Neal, the Home Office's "borders watchdog" for voicing concerns about airport security to the media. Neal claimed he was sacked for doing his job, while the Home Office argued that Neal had broken a contractual duty of confidentiality by speaking to the media about the matter (Syal 2024).

14. Notable recent "blunders" include the Post Office scandal in which failings in the Horizon computer system resulted in "the wrongful conviction of hundreds of innocent subpostmasters and subpostmistresses for offences of dishonesty" (Marshall 2022, 12). At the time of writing, inquiries are revealing tangled lines of accountability between managers of Post Office Limited (a wholly government-owned company), the computer company, and the ministers and officials involved.

15. Allegedly because of visceral dislike of the military on the part of some key Labour ministers (Hood c.1950 Vol 2, 68). It is notable that the 1945 White Paper on the NHS focused almost exclusively on curative rather than preventive medicine and made no attempt to bring the whole of medicine into one unified service (Hood 1945, 714). The predictable consequences of those decisions — costly duplication, lack of liaison and a tendency for vested interests to obstruct integration — are still all too evident eight decades and countless NHS reorganizations later.

16. See also the discussion of these data in Hood and Dixon (2015, 35–6).

17. When that trust-to-tell-the-truth question was phrased with specific reference to "senior" civil servants "in Whitehall" by YouGov, the responses it elicited indicated much lower levels of trust in such players — about 20 per cent — from 2003 to 2021 <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/v3zhkc6tgy/YG%20trackers%20-%20Trust.pdf>

3

The civil service in the United States

Crisis, or business as usual?

B. GUY PETERS

I T HAS BEEN ARGUED that people get the government they deserve.¹ That has probably been untrue of Americans who often have had better government than we deserve. I say that based on the tendency of Americans to denigrate government, resist taxation, and demean politicians and civil servants alike. Despite those negative attitudes, Americans have enjoyed periods of great effectiveness, and even creativity, by their government(s).² The strength of the economy and (until recently) the society have facilitated the performance of government, but American government itself has at times been effective on its own. Despite the disdain expressed by many citizens, civil servants get up each morning, go to work, and attempt to do the best job they can for those same citizens.

The ways in which Americans regard their government is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, the public expresses a generally high level of support for the Constitution and for symbols of the nation, but yet has a low regard for the institutions that are created by that constitution, and the individuals who occupy the institutions. Congress is particularly belittled by the American people, having confidence ratings similar to used car salesmen. Likewise, as Free and Cantril argued years ago, Americans are ideological conservatives and operational liberals.³ They applaud the idea of small, limited government but at the same time want more and better public services.

In addition to generally high levels of patriotism expressed by the public, the public is in general satisfied with the services being provided by their governments. Levels of satisfaction are higher for local and state governments, but even for the federal government there is satisfaction with many of the services provided. Likewise, the level of corruption — which is strongly related with poor public services and dissatisfaction — is low. Although there are a number of large-scale corruption scandals usually involving politicians, the day-to-day petty corruption by bureaucrats that erodes public trust and respect remains low.

When discussing the civil service in the United States, I will also have to include the roughly 4,500 political appointees who perform tasks that would be performed by civil servants in most other democratic governments. These “strangers”⁴ in government come in and out of office, depending on which party is in power, although some do manage to serve either party. In most of the discussion in this chapter I will be combining the career civil servants with the in and outers, and use the term “public service” to describe the combined workforce of the federal government, differentiating between the groups of employees when relevant.

While the general public, and some commentators in the media and academia, are happy to denigrate the public service, there is another important group of commentators who are concerned about the public service, largely because they are concerned about quality of governance in the United States. These commentators include academics and public intellectuals such as Paul Light, Donald Kettl, Donald Moynihan, David Lewis, and Paul Verkuil. Organizations such as the Volcker Alliance and the Partnership for Public Service also can be included in this group, along with think tanks such as the Brookings Institution. Finally, there are numerous current and former public servants who care deeply about the federal public service, and who add their voices to those expressing concern and offering ideas for reform.

Even with those jeremiads about the state of the public service in the United States, we should be aware that this has been a highly educated, highly skilled workforce. It is on average significantly better educated than is the workforce in the private sector; 33 percent of the federal workforce have master’s degrees or higher, compared to 15 percent in the private sector. Further, these individuals have expressed, and continue to express, the desire to serve the public and the nation as a significant motivation for their working in government. Finally, they appear to be able to serve the public well, with respondents to surveys from the American Customer Satisfaction Index ranking the federal government about the same as the private sector in general.⁵

This relatively positive description of the US civil service was true until January 20, 2025, when the Trump administration came to office. It is still largely true for the civil servants who remain in office,

but the attempts by the Trump administration to terminate large numbers of public employees, and to politicize the remainder of government, represents a major threat to the continued excellence of the civil service.⁶ As politicians and the more astute members of the general public begin to recognize the threats posed by these actions, some backlash has begun, the threat to good governance has become very real, and will be discussed as a postscript to this paper.

When were the periods of excellence?

There have been highly skilled and devoted individuals involved in American government at all stages of our history, there are two periods that appear to represent high points in the performance of the civil service and the rest of the executive branch. The first, somewhat predictably, was the Second World War. The civil service and the rest of government were faced with massive challenges in managing an armed force of up to 12 million in the military scattered all over the world. At the same time the federal government had to manage the war economy and a society faced with severe disruptions because of the war.

The period after World War II was characterized by some withdrawal from the government activities as the central focus of American life, although the Korean War, the beginnings of the Cold War, and the “hidden hand presidency” of Dwight Eisenhower did continue to have government much more central in American life than before the War.⁷ (Greenstein, 1994). This was a period of great growth in the economy, and despite the fears of nuclear war, was one of optimism about society and government.

An attempt to recreate the dedication to a common cause that characterized the period of World War II was part of the second period of excellence in government. This was the time of the administration of John Kennedy and at least the first part of that of Lyndon Johnson. President Kennedy’s famous inaugural address asking Americans what they could do for their country, his assassination and the “policy window” that it opened (Kingdom, 2011) contributed to a period of policy innovation and greater commitment to national service. The period of “Camelot” and the Great Society was short-lived, with the conflicts over the Vietnam War and civil rights dividing the country, bringing

the federal government into some disrepute. But still this period was one that altered government and society in fundamental ways.

Table 3.1 shows the level of trust of citizens for the federal government beginning in 1958. Towards the end of the Eisenhower administration roughly three-quarters of the American people trusted government to do the right thing. It remained high during the years of the Kennedy administration but began to fall with the onset of the Vietnam War, despite the large-scale social policy interventions of President Johnson’s Great Society. The Nixon administration that followed Lyndon Johnson’s accelerated a decline of respect and support for the federal government, and government in general, a function of both the Vietnam War and Watergate. During that short period trust in the federal government was almost cut in half.

Table 3.1
Trust in Federal Government

1958	1964	1966	1970	1974	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2023
73	77	65	54	36	27	41	41	35	21	41	28	17	19	18	21	15

Source: Pew Research Center, *Public Trust in Government*, September 19, 2023

For the full set of data see: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/public-trust-in-government-1958-2023/>

Trust remained at modest levels even during the Reagan administration and its especially negative attitude toward government and the civil service, with the President arguing famously that government was the problem, not the solution, to the country’s problems. As for the civil service, Reagan argued that government did not need the “best and brightest”, but only those who were “good enough”. (Savoie, 1994).⁸ There was a major increase in support for the federal government following the September 11, 2001 attacks, but that was short-lived. Trust then dropped to less than a third of what it had been in the late Eisenhower years and shows no signs of recovering.

The good news for the public service is that Americans tend to have higher respect for public employees than they do for government in general.⁹ For example, in a survey for the Partnership for Public

Service respondents, only forty percent of whom said they trusted the federal government, expressed generally positive views of public employees (Table 3.2). These survey results are not ringing endorsements of the federal workforce, but they are certainly higher than the evaluations usually given to members of Congress.

Table 3.2
Trust in the Federal Workforce

Most non-elected federal employees:

	Agree	Disagree
As competent as average private sector employees	58	26
Are doing public service	57	24
Are hard workers	56	26
Are corrupt	30	49

Source: Partnership for Public Service (2022)

Has there been a decline in the quality of the public service?

In 1987 Paul Volcker, former head of the Federal Reserve Bank, became voluntary chairman of the National Commission on the Public Service. That Commission later issued a report, focusing on the “Quiet Crisis of the Public Service” (National Commission, 1989).¹⁰ The sense of Chairman Volcker, and the very elite members of this Commission, was that there had been some loss in quality in the service, and that the future prospects for the public service were not good. This Commission was formed toward the end of the Reagan years of demeaning and constraining the public service, but it presented a view that went beyond partisan politics.¹¹

The report from Paul Volcker and his colleagues was the first of a number of studies and proposals for returning the public service to its glory days. For example, the Volcker Alliance now continues the work of the National Commission, and develops means of promoting

the public service as a worthy career. Likewise, the Partnership for Public Service does similar work, with more emphasis on the role of political appointees. Think tanks in Washington such as the Brookings Institution also do research on the public service, and recommend reforms. The crisis in the public service is not really that quiet anymore.

This book has the assumption that in at least some of the cases included there has been some decline in the quality of the public bureaucracy. That concern has been expressed by scholars, as well as by some former civil servants. Is this merely fond and inaccurate memories of the good old days, or is there some justification for this concern? My preliminary answer to that question is that there is some evidence to support either proposition, and that we need to be extremely careful when making claims about the civil service and its performance. The civil service remains populated by a number of skilled and dedicated individuals, but there are at the same time threats to the continued quality of the service.

One of the confounding factors in assessing the performance of the civil service is that the real performance of the civil service may depend in part on the quality of the politicians whom they serve. Likewise, the perceived performance of the civil service may depend upon the expectations of those same political appointees in government. POTUS can nominate over 4,000 individuals to take executive positions in the federal government, ranging from the cabinet secretaries to individuals much deeper within agencies (Light, 1995; Partnership for Public Service, 2024). The quality of these appointees has varied markedly among presidents, reaching its lowest point with Donald Trump and a band of largely unqualified cronies.¹²

Turnover

One measure of the quality of the civil service is the stability of the service. While there may be a concern about the civil service becoming entrenched and unresponsive, everything else being equal, a stable cadre of managers within government is important for the effectiveness of governing. As well as simply the experience with managing programs and coping with the issues that arise on a regular basis, a stable civil service represents an organizational memory that can help the “in

and outers” do their jobs better. Those political in and outers may not always appreciate the lessons of that memory, but it is useful.

Leaving aside the political appointees who do change regularly, the remainder of federal employment is rather stable. Quit rates, retirements, and other separations have been stable except for the year before and the first year of the first Trump administration. This is true both for the civil service as a whole and for the Senior Executive Service (OPM, various years). And these vacant positions were filled relatively easily. This does not mean that the new hires or promoted individuals are as skilled as those leaving, but it does mean that there is no massive loss of qualified people in federal employment.

Job satisfaction

While external assessments of the performance of government and the current state of the public service tend to be negative, the expressed job satisfaction of employees in the federal government remains rather high, and has been stable. Data from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey taken regularly since 2008 show that federal employees are in general satisfied with their jobs¹³. Further, this level of satisfaction did not seem to be affected particularly by the Trump administration, although those numbers may have been higher because of people having left the federal government or choosing not to take part in the survey.

Citizen satisfaction

As noted above, the citizens who interact with the federal government tend to be satisfied with the way they are treated, and the services they receive. Although the federal government provides relatively few services directly, citizens tend to find the ones that are delivered to be done about as well as services provided by the private sector. Not only some agencies such as the Post Office, National Park Service and the Social Security Administration which have numerous contacts with the public, tend to get very high ratings, but even the Internal Revenue Service appears to be well respected (Hitlin and Shutava, 2022).¹⁴

The fact that citizens are generally happy with their services does not mean, however, that the public service is necessarily doing its job

well. As the federal government becomes more expert and more involved with technological issues, there is an ever greater need for expert policy advice and longer-term planning. The financial crisis beginning in 2008 represented a major failure of regulation. The slow and halting response during the pandemic demonstrated a lack of planning for this eventuality, although the eventual response of agencies such as the National Institutes of Health was positive. The loss of expertise in the second Trump administration will only diminish that capacity to respond to crises.

Factors undermining the public service

Although the federal government continues to fill its positions (except perhaps for political appointees), it continues to lack respect from members of the public, and especially from elected politicians. The bureaucracy, and now the “Deep State”, has been and continues to be a target of candidates for public office. The complaints are often overblown and/or vague, but they are still effective politically. Some of the issues are perceptual, given that citizens tend to report reasonably good interactions with civil servants, but some are real. Further, there are a number of other issues that reduce the attractiveness of government for would be employees and tend to drive out current employees.

The Nature of the Public Service. There are a number of factors within the public service itself that affect the perceived quality of government, and of the public service. The first is that the federal government provides very few services directly to citizens. Most federal social and education programs are delivered by state and local governments. Some are also delivered by private organizations. The major exception to that statement is the Department of Veteran’s Affairs that does deliver health and other services to former members of the armed forces. It is not surprising therefore that the agency of the federal government that is most highly rated in surveys is the National Park Service — people see friendly park rangers when they visit national parks and monuments.

The nature of the federal workforce reflects technological change, as well as its detachment from direct service delivery. The federal workforce is now heavily composed of STEM¹⁵ workers. The large number of clerical employees that had been the major part of the civil

service are now gone, reflecting changes in office technology. Further, most of the STEM workers are not actually delivering services but rather are involved with research and regulation. Income tax returns are filed electronically, interactions with Social Security are on-line, and Medicare is increasingly managed by private firms.

It is perhaps not surprising that the opinion polls show less confidence in the federal government than in state and local governments. Citizens can see the sub-national governments actually delivering services. They may still complain about the services, but there are real people delivering those services to their communities. With a few notable exceptions such as the Department of Veterans Affairs the federal government is involved in less visible activities such as defense, regulation, and funnelling money to the lower-level governments.

Policy Problems. To begin this discussion of the roots of problems in the performance of government we should consider the problems that contemporary governments face. All governments throughout history have faced difficult problems. Romans building aqueducts or later governments building the infrastructure to cope with the Industrial Revolution, were undertaking difficult tasks given the available technology. The technological content of major public problems in 2024 is much higher — climate change as an obvious example — and the social and political complexity of others — immigration, civil rights — is huge. The private sector gets the easy problems, with governments having to confront the “wicked problems” that remain (Head, 2022).¹⁶

Governments and their public servants are therefore set up to fail. Having been handed almost unsolvable problems — or problems with solutions that are extremely contentious — government will be perceived as failing. The poor scores of the American federal government on variables such as trust and competence are at least in part a function of its failure to do the impossible, and do it for a low cost. Again, the conflicting views of Americans on government, wanting all their problems solved cheaply and in a manner that is painless to the average citizen, makes the job of public servant appear almost impossible.

The visibility of government actions also contributes to the negative reaction to the public sector and public servants. Working in government is working in a fishbowl, with every action scrutinized, both

within government and by the media. Accountability for public actions is an essential element of democratic government, but the contemporary level of scrutiny may generate paralysis rather than merely reporting and evaluating them (Schillemans, 2012).¹⁷ Thus, an increased amount of time and energy in government may be spent avoiding blame rather than in actually solving problems (Hood, 2013).¹⁸

Rewards

The general pattern of pay in the public service in the United States has been that government is a good place to begin a career but not a good place to end it. That is, pay and benefits in lower-level positions tend to be somewhat better than in the private sector, but those rewards of office in the senior civil service and executive positions tend to be lower than in the private sector — often by a great deal¹⁹. (Peters, 2013) At the extreme, the Secretary of Defense earns \$246,400 a year (2024) while running the second largest organization in the world. Numerous executives in the private sector earn in the millions of dollars each year.

Although when asked in annual surveys, civil servants generally express high levels of satisfaction with their jobs, the area with the lowest level of satisfaction is pay. There is ample evidence that individuals who join the civil service, or work as political appointees, do so out of a sense of public service rather than monetary rewards. The United States ranks rather well among other countries in the level of Public Service Motivation.²⁰ (Vandenabeele and Van de Walle, 2007). That motivation is especially true for employees at the higher levels of the organizations, as seen in the annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Surveys²¹ (Office of Personnel Management; see also Naff and Crum, 1999). They are in those positions because they want to do something for the public good with their skills.

The above said, however, they also want to receive adequate rewards for their commitment and for the use of their skills. The Congressional Budget Office (2024) has demonstrated the extent to which the upper echelons of the civil service are underpaid relative to the private sector. Their analysis is based on the qualifications of the individuals, rather than their rank within the civil service hierarchy. It shows that on average federal employees with a master's degree earn

4 percent less in total compensation (salaries and benefits) than do those in the private sector, while those with professional and doctoral degrees earn 22 percent less. Critics of the civil service have argued that the security of the positions can make up for those differences, but these are large disparities.²² That security may be overrated, however, given rather arbitrary political decisions such as the pay freeze of 2011 to 2013, and the introduction of contribution requirements for the federal retirement system for hires after 2014.

The Senior Executive Service (SES) includes the upper echelons of the career civil service, as well as a number of political appointees, filling managerial or professional positions. They are therefore some of the most important members of the public service, and their decisions to remain in government positions appear to be increasingly affected by poor rewards relative to those obtainable in the private sector. The Office of Personnel Management surveys SES officials who are leaving the public service each year, and the number who cite pay concerns is significant, and increasing slightly. There are a host of other reasons why SES members left government, notably political interference in their jobs, but poor rewards appear to be a significant concern, just as it was in the Volcker report in 1989.

Excessive layering

One of the continuing problems for the public service has been the loss of autonomy and the increasing layering of political appointees on top of the career public service (see Light, 1995; Partnership for Public Service, 2024).²³ This increased number of political appointees and their deeper penetration into public organizations is a part of the general process of politicization of the public service (see below), but may be as important in reducing the autonomy of the bureaucracy, and therefore the sense of job satisfaction of career public employees.²⁴ A host of new political positions in government continue to be created, especially in the Trump administrations. This proliferation of political positions is apparent despite the attempts of the National Performance Review to reduce the hierarchies within federal agencies.

While there is a general pattern of layering or “thickening”, it has been especially apparent in agencies that the incumbent administration considers crucial for their policy goals—so called “choke points”

in the federal government (Doherty et al., 2015).²⁵ Even within individual agencies there are key positions that a president may want to control with a loyal appointee. Except for presidents who want to exercise full control over the entire system, e.g. Nixon and Trump, there will be differences among presidents in which positions they consider crucial for their administration's goals.

Congress. The public service in the United States must serve two masters. One is the President and the chain of command that cascades down within the executive branch. The other is Congress. While Congress has the constitutional duty to exercise oversight over the executive, and is responsible for the public purse, for many members of the public service (and for many of the expert commentators mentioned earlier) its level of micro-management prevents the skilled employees within government from utilizing those skills to their fullest extent.

Congress also intervenes in the affairs of the public service by limiting the pay available to public servants. The general rule is that members of the public service cannot receive salaries higher than that of Congress. Congressional salaries are kept relatively low because of the political difficulties in raising them, and therefore the pay of public servants remains low.²⁶ In most other advanced democracies public servants do earn a good deal more than do politicians (except perhaps the president or prime minister) and the managerial and policy capacity of the public service is recognized.

Congress has also been central in maintaining what Donald Kettl (2016) has referred to as “Jurassic Government”.²⁷ The federal government, for example, retains a rather old-fashioned personnel management system based on formal pay scales and seniority. There are numerous ongoing attempts to make the federal personnel management system more flexible, and more capable of recruiting the highly skilled personnel needed in a government dominated by technical and scientific issues (OMB, 2023).²⁸ These have been driven primarily by the executive branch, rather than by Congress. In addition, the federal budget process is rather antiquated and emphasizes the capacity for Congress to control the spending agencies, rather than the capacity of those agencies to best utilize their resources to achieve policy goals.

Reform. The National Commission on the Public Service, and every report of that type since, has called for reform of the federal government, and especially the civil service. Likewise, a number of presidents have attempted to reform the public service, some by appointing commissions such as the National Performance Review in the Clinton administration, and others by more direct action such as George W. Bush's advocacy of the PART program to enhance performance management (Lavertu et al., 2013).²⁹ The attempts to reform the public service appear almost endless, and have the effect of creating "reform fatigue" among federal workers (de Vries and de Vries, 2023).³⁰

This is not to say that some reforms have not been beneficial. Some have represented good faith efforts to improve the performance of the federal government, and in some cases have sought to empower the workforce. Other reforms, however, have been thinly disguised attempts to reduce the size and influence of the public service, and to establish greater political control over public servants. The frequent attempts at reform, and the frequency of unintended consequences of reforms (see Peters and Nagel, 2023) tend to make civil servants reluctant to invest very much energy in their implementation.³¹

Contracting Out and Downsizing. The prevailing sentiment in the United States favoring market-based solutions to problems carries over into the federal government. One of the standard remedies for problems — including the perception that government itself is too large and intrusive — is to contract out tasks, and permit the presumably more efficient private sector to handle the problem. Medicare costs too much?: then allow private health insurance companies to offer "Medicare Advantage" programs, even though they provide generally poorer services for more federal money (Williams, 2023).³² Too many policy advisors in government?: fire them, and then hire many of them back as consultants for higher salaries. This list of dubious uses of contracting could be extended, but the basic point is that the unquestioned assumption of superior performance by the private sector appears to impose both higher financial costs and lower quality (see DiIulio, 2014).³³

There has been a massive growth of contract employees, and money spent on contracting out services, during the period of declin-

ing trust in government. It is not clear whether this is a cause or an effect of that diminished trust, or if both merely reflect the disdain for public servants that was so manifest in the Reagan and Trump administrations. The extent of contracting out of services can be seen in Table 3.3. Some of this contracting has been for routine services, such as cleaning federal office buildings, but it also involves an increasing amount of expert policy advice on a range of complex policy topics. This growth in contracting has occurred while the size of the federal civil service has remained steady.

Table 3.3
Contracting in Federal Government (Fiscal years, \$bn)

2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
412	444	478	517	572	601	656	622	604	765

Source: Office of Management and Budget, *Budget of the United States*, annual

Reliance on contracting has several negative effects on the public service. First, it makes an implicit, if not explicit, argument that the public service cannot do the job, or at least cannot do it well or efficiently. Second, it creates greater risk of the Washington litany of “fraud, waste and abuse” (Verkeuil, 2017, 52) and reduces the professionalism of government. Finally, contracting places career public servants in the position of working with or for individuals who are better paid but often not as knowledgeable about the details of the programs. What it does do, however, is keep the size of the civil service and direct personnel spending low — something that is politically important, especially for Republican politicians.

Contracting out services is one component of a general strategy of downsizing federal employment. The unquestioned assumption on the political right is that “the bureaucracy” is too large and that government could work as well or better if it were smaller. In the United States going back at least to the Hoover Commissions (see Arnold, 1998) the additional assumption has been that government should work like a business.³⁴ Even some Democratic politicians have appeared to adopt this view — the Clinton administration reduced federal employment by approximately 16 percent.³⁵ Those cuts were soon

replaced by the George W. Bush administration, largely in national security in response to 9/11. Promising to cut bureaucracy is always a good tactic in presidential campaigns, all the while promising also to provide new and better services.

Politicization

One of the most important reasons for the perceived decline in the quality of the public service, and for some increases in turnover, is the political environment within which federal employees function. In surveys, federal public servants overwhelmingly answer that the reason they are in government is to provide service to their fellow citizens, but the politicized atmosphere of government appears to be an impediment to their achieving that goal. For example, in their exit survey beginning in 2013, the political environment is the most commonly cited reason for departures from government by SES members (OPM, various years). Senior leadership, quite possibly meaning political officials, in the agency has also been a common reason given for wanting to leave government.

The attempts at politicizing the civil service are reflected in the politicization of the appointments process for the political appointees who supervise the civil servants. The last several presidents have had significant difficulties in filling all the positions in government that they are entitled to. For example, as of April 23, 2024, the Political Appointee Tracker was following 813 key positions requiring Senate approval in the Biden administration. Only 562 had been confirmed, 67 more positions have nominees, and 80 are filled by temporary appointments. The vacancy rates and turnover rates of political appointees in the Trump administration were even higher (see Bednar and Piper, 2022).³⁶

The politicized and adversarial nature of American politics for the last several decades has made recruitment of qualified individuals for appointed positions more difficult (see McKenzie, 2011). Many promising candidates for public office simply do not want to go through the process and take the abuse that is often handed out in Senate hearings and in the media. Further, especially in a period of divided government there is a real possibility that a qualified candidate may not be confirmed by the Senate for partisan and ideological reasons. The

complaints against these officials have at times been over fine points of ideology and loyalty — so called litmus tests — rather than over their capacity to perform the tasks for which they are nominated.

The first Trump administration was the apotheosis of politicization, at least until that time. It was clear that the President and most of his minions had no respect for the civil service, or for the cadre of political appointees that would usually go into executive positions. Terms such as “The Swamp” and “The Deep State” were used to describe the federal government and its customary inhabitants. In addition to the spate of verbal insults to the public service, President Trump proposed utilizing a new “Schedule F” to convert most of the positions in the civil service from the merit system to political appointments³⁷ (Moynihan, 2022; Campbell, 2023).³⁸

Given the disrespect for the public service shown during this administration, the period of Trump’s first presidency was marked by a major loss of talent in the civil service. The monthly probability of a member of the Senior Executive Service leaving government increased six-fold in the first months of the Trump administration, and remained at least twice as high as normal during the remainder of this time in office (Doherty et al., 2019).³⁹ The losses were especially high for individuals with broad policy and management responsibilities. Turnover tends to increase somewhat whenever there is a new president, especially one of a different party, but this was an extreme change (Bolton et al., 2021).⁴⁰

The loss of talent during the Trump years was not uniform across government, but occurred most heavily in agencies that the administration had targeted as being important to their political goals. These included agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Labor, and Health and Human Services. These organizations have historically been more aligned with the Democratic party, and President Trump was unlikely to find any loyalists to support his policies there. In the second administration those targets are being supplemented by foreign aid and agencies concerned with diversity.

In addition to the differential losses in the above agencies, other agencies with more professionalized employees also suffered significant losses. This was especially true for the Department of State, which lost a significant number of career diplomats during those four

years. The first Trump administration had already reduced the quality of the ambassadorial corps by a number of appointments of extremely unqualified friends, but the Foreign Service also lost a large number of experienced personnel who could not support his isolationism and disinterest in human rights (Drezner, 2019).⁴¹

I should note here that the civil service itself has become more politicized, despite the continuing importance of the Hatch Act in enforcing partisan neutrality. That politicization has been greater around issues such as environmental policy in the Trump administration and Gaza in the Biden administration. These actions are making claims of a less neutral civil service easier for politicians to justify, and are making it easier for the politicians to impose more controls over the civil service. Indeed, some of the increased politicization in the second Trump administration is justified (at least to him) by politicization during the Biden administration.

Conclusion: Half empty or half full?

The public service of the United States is perhaps not what it once was, but at the same time it remains an effective institution for making and delivering public policy. Some of the nostalgia for the good old days may reflect some fundamental changes in the tasks being performed by government, and the ways in which they are performed. The federal civil service no longer depends so much on talented generalists, but rather on technical and professional expertise. Those generalists are still important in their way, but the challenges of governing now involve much higher levels of expertise.

The problem for public servants appears to be that they are often not able to perform their tasks as well as they might, given the constraints imposed by other actors in the political process. Political actors in the executive branch often seek to restrict the autonomy of the civil service, and Congress places financial and organizational hurdles in their way. Despite that, civil servants and many of their politically appointed superiors continue to provide good service to the public. The current administration continues efforts to strengthen the civil service, but must continue to confront the distrust of many citizens for the federal government.

The answer to the above question about the quality and effectiveness of the public service is easier to answer now that there is a second Trump administration. The damage already done to the public service in the United States is being magnified in the second Trump administration. The notion of a unified executive branch and of unbridled executive power is reducing the autonomy of the civil service and the quality of the appointees to office is even lower and more extreme than in the first iteration. Even in the first month, there is little doubt that the quality of governance will suffer under such a regime.

The impact on good governance through the civil service is even greater because of the creation of the mis-named Department of Government Efficiency led by Elon Musk. With little understanding of how American government functions Musk and his henchmen have been attempting to dismantle many effective organizations such as USAID and the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau, some for apparently corrupt reasons. Further, institutions of accountability such as the Inspectors General and the Special Counsel have also been weakened.

The questions at this writing are first how many of these cuts and terminations will survive challenges in the courts. Many of these decisions appear to violate budgeting and civil service laws. The other major question is what will be the long-term damage to the civil service and to government from these actions. That is impossible to know now, but it does appear that there could be damage that will take years to overcome. What were secure and important jobs have become downgraded to being servants of one person's desire for power. Destroying institutions can be done very quickly it appears, but rebuilding them takes much longer.

NOTES

1. Often attributed to Joseph de Maitre.
2. Nelson W. Polsby, *Political Innovation in America: The Politics of Policy Initiation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984); Paul C. Light, *A Government Ill Executed: The Decline of the Public Service and how to Reverse It* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2008).
3. Lloyd A. Free & Hadley Cantril, *The political beliefs of Americans: A study of public opinion*. (New York: Clarion, 1968).
4. Hugh Heclo, *A Government of Strangers?: Executive Politics in Washington* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1977).
5. <https://theacsi.org/industries/government/>
6. Hannah Natanson and Emily Davies, "Trump administration directs agency heads to fire most probationary staff", *Washington Post* February 14, 2025.
7. Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).
8. Donald J. Savoie, *Reagan, Thatcher, Mulroney: In Search of a New Bureaucracy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994).
9. See Amy E. Lerman, *Good Enough for Government Work: The Public Reputation Crisis in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).
10. National Commission on the Public Service, *Leadership for America: Rebuilding the Public Service* (Washington, DC: National Commission, 1989).
11. A number of Republicans, e.g. former President Gerald Ford and Paul H. O'Neill who would be Secretary of the Treasury for George W. Bush. This report was well received in Washington, but a second, similar report a bit over a decade later was hardly noticed at all.
12. There were, of course, many qualified people in the Trump administration, but the number of less qualified, and the high vacancy rate of positions, made this the weakest group of appointees in recent history.
13. Office of Personnel Management (various years), *Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey* (Washington, DC: OPM).
14. Paul Hitlin and Nadzeya Shutava, *Trust in Government: A Close Look at Public Perceptions of the Federal Government and its Employees* (Washington, DC: Partnership for the Public Service).
15. Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics.
16. The term "wicked problems" is vastly overused, but it does highlight the difficulties faced by decision-makers in the public sector. See Brian W. Head, *Wicked Problems in Public Policy: Understanding and Responding to Complex Problems* (London: Macmillan, 2022).
17. Thomas Schillemans, *Mediatization of Public Services: How Organizations Adapt to News Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
18. Christopher Hood, *The Blame Game* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

19. B. Guy Peters, Rewards for High Public Office in the United States, In M. Brans and B. G. Peters, eds., *Rewards for High Public Office in Europe and North America* (London: Routledge, 2013).
20. Walter Vandenabeele, And Steven Van de Walle “International Differences in Public Service Motivation: Comparing Regions of the World”, in James L. Perry and Annie, Hondeghem, eds. *Motivation in Public Management: The Call of Public Service* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2007.
21. Office of Personnel Management (various years), *SES Exit Report* (Washington, DC: OPM); Katherine C. Naff., & John. Crum, “Working for America: Does Public Service Motivation Make a Difference? *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 19 (1999), 5–16.
22. President Reagan argued that government employees should receive 6 percent less pay than private employees because of their tenured positions. That figure seems to have been an invention of the president.
23. Paul C. Light. *Thickening Government: Federal Hierarchy and the Diffusion of Authority* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1995); Partnership for Public Service (2024) *Layered Leadership: Explaining How Political Appointments Stack Up at Federal Agencies* (Washington, DC: PPS). <https://presidentialtransition.org/reports-publications/layered-leadership-examining-how-political-appointments-stack-up-at-federal-agencies/>
24. Paul C. Light. *A Government Ill Executed: The Decline of the Public Service and how to Reverse It* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2008).
25. Kathleen. M. Doherty, David. E. Lewis and Scott. Limbocker, Executive Control and Turnover in the Senior Executive Service, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 29 (2019), 159–174.
26. Congressional and public service salaries are now indexed to inflation, but that keeps them more or less even with prices but not with earnings levels of other managers and professionals in the economy.
27. Donald F. Kettl. *Escaping Jurassic Government: How to Recover America’s Lost Commitment to Competence* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2016).
28. Office of Management and Budget, *Budget of the United States, FY2023–2024; Analytical Perspectives* (Washington, DC: OMB, 2023).
29. Stéphane Lavertu, David. E. Lewis and Donald P. Moynihan, Government Reform, Political Ideology, and Administrative Burden: The Case of Performance Management in the Bush Administration, *Public Administration Review* (2013) 73, 845–57.
30. Michael S. E. de Vries, & M. S. de Vries. Repetitive reorganizations, uncertainty and change fatigue”. *Public Money & Management*, 43 (2023), 126–135.
31. B. G. Peters and Maxmillian L. Nagel, From Benign to Malign: Unintended Consequences and the Growth of Zombie Policies (Unpublished Paper, University of Pittsburgh, 2024).
32. Brendan Williams, (2023). The enemy within: Medicare advantage and the future of U.S. healthcare. *Quinnipiac Health Law Journal*, 26, 287–324.

33. John J. Dilulio, *Bring Back the Bureaucrats: Why More Federal Workers will Lead to Better Government* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2014).
34. Peri E. Arnold. *Making the Managerial Presidency: Comprehensive Reorganization Planning, 1905–1996*, 2nd ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).
35. The purpose of these cuts was primarily to eliminate middle managers, to make government organizations flatter, and to empower lower echelon workers to make more of their own decisions, B. Guy Peters and Donald J. Savoie, "Managing Incoherence: The Coordination and Empowerment Conundrum", *Public Administration Review* 56 (1996), 281–90.
36. For President Trump, both the extreme demands of personal loyalty and the absence of any strong connections with the Washington milieu made the appointments process especially challenging. See Nicholas R. Bednar Christopher, Piper (2022) "Administrative Policymaking Amid Vacancies and Actings," paper presented at Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April, 2022.
37. Campbell, John L. *Institutions Under Siege: Donald Trump's Attack on the "Deep State"*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). Donald P. Moynihan, Public Management for Populists: Trump's Schedule F Executive Order and the Future of the Civil Service, *Public Administration Review* 82 (2022), 174–8.
38. At this writing the second Trump administration is not implementing Schedule F so much as making sweeping firings of civil servants with little or no justification.
39. Kathleen Doherty, David E. Lewis and Scott Limbocker, Executive Control and Turnover in the Senior Executive Service, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 29 (2019), 159–174.
40. Alexander Bolton, John M. de Figueiredo, David E. Lewis, Elections, Ideology, and Turnover in the US Federal Government, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 31 (2021), 451–466.
41. Daniel W. Drezner "Present at the Destruction: The Trump Administration and the Foreign Policy Bureaucracy", *Journal of Politics*, 81 (2019), 723–30.

4



Canadian public service has lost standing: why?

DONALD J. SAVOIE

IN THE 1940S, 50S AND 60S, Canadians had “good reason” to trust their national institutions from Parliament to its national public service (Ibbitson, 2023). Canada had helped the allies win the Second World War and its national government had planned the war effort and run the economy very well. Unemployment was down and yet prices had also been held down, at least when goods were available. When concerns turned to the post-war economy, many feared that the end of the war would trigger a recession, if not another depression. Public servants responded with plans to deal with a severe economic downturn. Trust in the federal government remained high until the late 1960s.

Prime Minister Pierre E. Trudeau launched a series of policy initiatives shortly after coming to office in 1968 to promote a “Just Society,” and the federal public service was expected to pave the way (Axworthy and Trudeau, 1991). Politicians on the government side and public servants worked hand in hand. They were on the same team and worked well within the traditional “bargain.” The bargain called on public servants to advise government of the day without fear or favour, in a non-partisan fashion, with discretion and professionalism and deliver program and services in an efficient fashion, respecting centrally-prescribed rules and regulations governing government operations, in return for anonymity and security of tenure (Hood and Lodge, 2006).

Memoirs of former prime ministers and senior Cabinet ministers reveal that they held the Canadian public service in high esteem.¹ It was known for its frugality, its professionalism, its loyalty to the government of the day and its ability to serve without drawing attention to itself. Cabinet ministers knew that they held the power to decide and that they were not threatened by the power or influence of public servants. J.L. Granatstein documents the work of the Canadian public service in the post-World War II period. He writes that public servants “felt a duty to serve their country and its people. If that sounds trite and pious today, it is only because our age is more cynical” (Granatstein, 1983, 9-10).

Ministers and their departments had far fewer oversight bodies to answer to and there was limited second-guessing from central-agency staff. The policy process worked well because it was simple and straightforward while program managers had a relatively free hand to deliver programs and services, provided that they worked within centrally prescribed rules and regulations in financial and human resources. The Canadian public service was small, elitist, and effective. The role of the media was largely limited to be a narrator or an independent observer reporting and commenting on political events.

The federal government led the way with the provinces in launching a series of ambitious programs between 1940 and 1970 as Ottawa teamed up with all provincial governments in building the welfare state. The measures included, among other initiatives, a universal national Medicare program, a national compulsory contribution pension plan, an expanded Unemployment Insurance Program, a program for persons who were physically disabled, a Guaranteed Income Supplement, substantial increases in post-secondary funding, a national housing act, Aboriginal social assistance, an expanded Family Allowance program, and an equalization program to deal with fiscal disparities among the provinces (Moscovitch, 2015). The federal government also led the charge, beginning in 1949, to build a 7,821km national highway system that would link Canada from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean.

Things began to unravel in the 1970s. Harvey Sims, a former Canadian public servant, wrote a paper on Public Confidence in Government. He signed it as “an economist” who “worked in the Department of Finance and the Privy Council Office during the years in which Canadians’ trust in their federal government plummeted” (Sims, 2001, 29). He brought his point home by quoting Gordon Robertson, who served as Secretary to the Cabinet between the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s and has often been described as the “gold standard” for clerks of the Privy Council (Sutherland, 2006, 97). Robertson told a journalist in 2001: “I guess I don’t trust the government” (Fraser, 2001, K1 and K4). If Robertson could no longer trust government, who could? Sims outlined several reasons to explain why Canadians were losing trust in their federal government.

Public opinion surveys also document that trust in the federal government is on a downward slide. A recent public opinion survey reveals that trust in the national government among Canadians stood at 34 percent in 2022, down from 37 percent in 2021 and 45 percent in 2018.² There are a host of reasons that explain this downward slide and both politicians and career officials need to share the blame. Former federal public servants report that the public service continues to lose ground on the trust factor with the people they serve. Paul Tellier, former clerk of the Privy Council and head of the federal public service, reports with concern on the growing lack of trust between politicians and senior level officials in the public service (May, 2022). There is also a growing lack of trust between Canadians and federal public servants, with a survey revealing that “only six percent” of Canadians expressed a lot of trust in senior federal public servants (May, 2016).

Public servants now readily admit that they are afraid to speak truth to politicians (Institute of Governance and The Brian Mulroney Institute, 2022). This is a far cry from the close working relationship politicians and senior public servants were able to establish between 1940 and the late-1960s. Canadians are also voicing their displeasure at the deteriorating level of services the Canadian government provides (May, 2022). Forty-five percent of Canadians report that they are “very unsatisfied” or “unsatisfied” with the services the Canadian government provides. In contrast, sixty-eight percent are either very satisfied or satisfied with the level of services they receive from provincial governments (Angus Reid Institute, 2022). So, what happened?

Bureaucracy bashing becomes de rigueur for aspiring politicians

Since the late 1970s in Canada, as elsewhere, politicians see political advantages in running against government. They make the case that the problem with government is its size, its cost, its complexity and its impenetrable and unaccountable bureaucracy (Sims, 2001, 4). Whatever the reason, the government of Canada’s expenditures and revenues were in sync until the early 1970s. Deficits, when they occurred, were small and they were followed by modest surpluses. Leaving aside the war years, program spending and taxes raised were also

in sync. Government of Canada program spending in 1971 was \$13.77 billion and tax revenue amounted to \$13.75 billion (Sims, 2001, 15).

The government's fiscal position has deteriorated since, particularly over the past twenty years. Today, the government's expenditure budget amounts to \$432.94 billion, with a \$30.3 billion deficit for 2024-2025 (Canada, 2023a). The government expenditure budget for 2023-24 amounted to \$432.9 billion with \$60.7 billion allocated to personnel cost. It is important to note that another \$49.4 billion is allocated to health care transfers to the provinces who provide the personnel for delivering health care services and another \$44 billion to service the debt (Canada, 2023b). In 1965 spending on personnel amounted to \$1.9 billion out of a total expenditure budget of \$8.3 billion, which included \$1.0 billion for interest on debt and no health care transfers to the provinces (Canada, 1965a). The Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer recently reported that "operating spending increased significantly over the past two years... due both to an expansion in the size of the public service and to increased compensation" for full-time employees (Canada, 2023c, 1). The Canadian government currently employs 357,247 public servants. This does not include military personnel, uniformed RCMP officers and Crown Corporations. Global Affairs Canada (formerly External Affairs), for example, employs 7,460 public servants (Canada, 2023d). The External Affairs Department employed 2,597 public servants in 1965 (Bourgon, 2009). In 1965, the federal government only had 140,000 employees and this before new information technology could process applications and payments in a highly efficient manner and before a number of high employment agencies were transferred to community organizations and provincial governments, resulting from the mid-1990s program review, which included airports and ports.³ Today, the government of Canada has over 300 organizations while in 1965, it was home to 42 (Savoie, 2024).

Public sector unions

Growth in the size of government is hardly the only difference between managing today compared to managing in the 1960s. The Canadian public service embarked on what was then described as a

“profoundly significant” course based on a “new statute enacted without precedent or premeditation” when Parliament passed the Public Service Staff Relations Act in 1967 (Arthurs, 1969). The Act meant that public servants were now paid as a “matter of right” rather than as a “matter of privilege of the Crown” (Doerr, 1981, 63).

Collective bargaining in government is unlike bargaining in the private sector because the push and pull in government depends not on a bottom line of revenues, expenses, market share and profits or on how well the firm and its employees are doing in a competitive environment, but on political and policy considerations and the state of public finances. There is a world of difference between the two. For one thing, public servants work in a non-competitive field. For another, public sector managers and employees do not have financial incentives, as found in the private sector, to minimize labour costs. If anything, incentives work the other way around. Public sector managers, for example, have no incentive and no interest in moving their operations to jurisdictions or communities with lower labour costs, as can happen in the private sector.

New Public Management measures and the call to let the manager manage do not easily square with the work of public sector unions. How can government let managers manage when the more important human resources decisions are taken out of their hands? Government managers, for example, have no say on salary levels and employee benefits. When the president of the Treasury Board Secretariat announced in December 2022 a return to office two to three days a week by March 31, 2023, the public sector unions strongly opposed the decision, calling it “disingenuous” and serving notice that they would include the “right to work remotely” in future collective agreements. The Treasury Board Secretariat explained that the directive “will be applied to the entirety of the core public administration” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2022) — so much for letting managers manage. Management served notice that the decision regarding where public servants work belongs to the employer. The unions did not agree, and they were able to make their argument win the day in the 2023 negotiations leading to new collective agreements.

It has never been easy to deal with non-performers in government. It is even more difficult today, given collective bargaining and the

possibility that employees and their union representatives will go to the courts if management initiates an action to remove anyone for non-performance. It requires documenting, in minute detail, the causes for dismissal and numerous meetings with superiors, human resources specialists, and legal advisors to see the process through completion. To avoid the hassle, managers focus on things over which they have more control and such things are often designed to enlarge the scope of their programs or units rather than deal with non-performers. In any event, they have little incentive to engage in what would likely be at least a two-to-three-year process to terminate an employee for non-performance. Many managers today do not remain in the same position for much more than two years, moving on to a promotion or a lateral position with better prospects for advancement. Best to leave the problem for the next manager to deal with, and on and on it goes. The result is that only a handful of employees are terminated every year, anywhere between 20 to less than 100, out of a 357,000 plus workforce (Canada, 2011; Canada, 2019).

Executives and managers who want to terminate an employee can consult the Treasury Board Secretariat document titled: *Guidelines for Termination or Demotion for Unsatisfactory Performance; Termination or Demotion for Reasons Other than Breaches of Discipline or Misconduct; and Termination of Employment During Probation*. The guide is no more user-friendly than its title. It begins: “These guidelines support the principles set out in the *Policy Framework for People Management*.” It then outlines a “to-do” list for managers to consider, including: the required level of job performance is determined; the level of performance required is communicated to the employee; reasonable levels of supervision and instruction are provided to the employee; the employee is allowed a reasonable period of time to meet the required level of job performance; the employee is provided with reasonable warnings about the consequences of his or her continued failure to meet the required level of job performance; and once the inability to meet the required level of job performance has been established, reasonable alternative employment within the competence of the employee is considered (Canada, 2011). Executives and managers have every reason to ask — why bother?

Transparency then and now

Relations between ministers and public servants were straightforward until the mid-1980s, at least when compared to today. Access to information legislation that came into force in 1983 and the establishment of several new Officers of Parliament continue to have a profound impact both on the work of public servants and in their dealings with politicians.

Until the access to information legislation and the Officers of Parliament came into play, ministers and public servants were able to work on policy positions without interference from outside their immediate circle. However, since the 1970s, public servants have had to define a new working relationship with their political masters, putting aside their old processes. They readily admit that access to information legislation has made them reluctant to commit their views and recommendations to paper. They fear that they could well appear in the media and force officials to support or defend them in public, thus becoming political actors opposing or defending a policy position. This flies in the face of the traditional bargain, since that, under the bargain, the views and advice of civil servants are to be private and their actions anonymous.

One senior official at the Treasury Board Secretariat observed: “we are now all sitting ducks. I cringe when I write an email because I never know whether it will appear on the front page of a newspaper six months down the road. It is possible now for someone to ask for all exchanges, including emails, between senior official X and senior official Y. We can no longer blue-sky or have a playful mind. We no longer have the luxury of engaging in a frank and honest debate. It is now very difficult to put down on paper — be careful, minister, there are problems with your ideas and what you want to do” (Savoie, 2003, 50). One can assume that this leads to less disciplined thinking as strong memoranda give way to PowerPoint presentations. One can also assume that there is less room for critical thinking, less frank and fearless advice, resulting in less rigorous policy debates in government and weaker policies.

Anyone who has worked in the Canadian government at a mid-management level and up, knows that working under Access to In-

formation is not without challenges. It opens up their work to those who may not understand the various political and bureaucratic forces at play and who also play by different rules. We know that many senior federal public servants have turned to different means to sidestep the legislation; oral briefings are far more common than in years past and some carry two smart phones, one that is accessible under the legislation and another that is not.

Until the late 1970s, the role of the Office of the Auditor General was limited to carrying out traditional financial audits. Today, the Office carries out comprehensive and value for money audits which are much more subjective and controversial. In addition, there are now eight Officers of Parliament that have an oversight role on the work of public servants.⁴ The work of these officers hardly encourages public servants to take risks, to rise their heads above the parapet or to innovate in program delivery and services.

Boundaries are collapsing

Between 1940 and the late 1960s, departments and agencies worked as silos, fairly independent from one another and from central agencies. The permanent heads of line departments very likely came up through the ranks of the departments they were asked to lead. They also stayed in the same position for extended periods. Today, the average stay of a deputy minister in a department is 2 to 3 years (Bourgault and Dunn, 2014). We have also seen, since the 1970s, sustained efforts to break down departmental silos, policy silos, budget silos, program silos and data silos, and to promote a “whole of government” approach to developing policies and delivering programs and services. Former Prime Minister Pierre E. Trudeau took the first step to start breaking down silos. He explained why he wanted to be prime minister: “One of the reasons why I wanted this job, when I was told that it might be there, is because I felt it very important to have a strong central government, build up the executive, build up the Prime Minister’s Office” (Radwanski, 1978, 146). He held firm to his commitment and today central agencies, including the Prime Minister’s Office and the Privy Council Office have both grown in size (in 1965, PMO and PCO had a staff complement of 127 while, today,

the number is 1307). The two central agencies have also substantially expanded both their role and reach in the machinery of government (Canada, 1965b; Canada, 2023e).

Governing from the centre is now firmly entrenched in Ottawa and no prime minister since the first Trudeau has ever tried to turn back the clock. It holds a number of advantages: it provides a window on policies and operations of line departments; helps to keep bouncing ministers in line; enables the government to deal with one voice in the era of 24-hour cable news cycle and social media and helps the prime minister and his or her government to ensure a degree of coherence when establishing policies.

There are also disadvantages. Strong ministers able to take charge and define a policy or a program, as was the case until the 1960s, are much less evident today. At one time, one could associate a major policy initiative with a minister — among others, Monique Bégin and Medicare, C.D. Howe and Industry and Lionel Chevrier and Transport. The absence of strong ministers able to take ownership of a policy or a file makes accountability much more difficult because, leaving aside the prime minister, no one appears to be in charge.

Collapsing boundaries also have wide implications for public servants. In public administration, boundaries are important. When you draw boundaries, you not only establish space within which people can operate, you also draw a visible understanding of how things work. When you remove boundaries, you remove this understanding, and without boundaries in government, we end up with “a big conceptual mess” (Wilson, 1999, 57). In a traditional bureaucracy, policy and decision making is top-down, consensus is established through acquiescence to higher authority, and smooth operations are ensured by respecting authority, rules and traditions. Accountability, under the traditional bureaucracy model, also made it easier to ensure that ministers and their senior department officials were able to manage issues for which they were both responsible and accountable.

Things are vastly different today. Michael Hatfield, a retired senior economist with Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, writes: “Making sure that the director of every possible unit with the remotest interest in the policy area has signed off on policy advice often becomes more important than subjecting that advice to real

scrutiny by people with the knowledge and capacity for careful vetting” (Hatfield, 2014, 13). Flipping documents between policy shops in Ottawa, always with an eye on what prime ministers and their advisors are interested in, often ignores a key ingredient in shaping sound policy — how it can best be implemented. Implementation is where federal public servants meet Canadians.

Unless the prime minister decides otherwise, flipping proposals and documents between policy shops and departments is how the federal government now decides. Mel Cappe, former clerk of the Privy Council, spoke to the skills public servants need: “e-government requires public servants without borders, people who can work effectively across departments, programs and other borders... who see an issue in a broader horizontal context,” (Cappe, 2002, 7) adding that the government is “moving away from a traditional model of public service based on hierarchical, directive management” (Cappe, 2001, 3). Implementing Canada’s climate change strategy, for example, involves at least fourteen departments and agencies, a complex series of 240 programs, provincial governments and the territories as well as the international community. No minister and no permanent head of department and agency can plow through this bureaucracy and strike decisions in a timely fashion. The prime minister often can, and this explains why ministers and senior public servants have learned the art of delegating up important decisions, issues that can create political problems or that have the potential to hit the media. But the prime minister can only deal with a limited number of issues and no decision in government often constitutes a decision.

Boundaries between the political and the public service are also less visible than they once were. Tom Kent, principal secretary to Prime Minister Pearson, described the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) up to the late 1960s: “The PMO was then utterly different from what it became in the Trudeau era and has since remained. There was no bevy of deputies and assistants and principals this-and-that, with crowds of support staff” (Kent, 1988, 225). Observers of Canadian politics are arguing that “kids in short pants” are assuming more power than they should with “unelected people basically given the authority by the Prime Minister to say — go and tell so and so to do such and such” (Haws, 2018). Paul Tellier, as noted earlier a former

clerk of the Privy Council Office, observed that “the current government (i.e., Justin Trudeau) with centralization of everything in the PMO, is in the process of destroying the public service and the word destroying is not too strong” (May, 2022).

The offices of ministers today look very differently than they did in the 1960s. A minister’s office in the 1960s had a political staff of one or two assistants, namely an executive and a legislative assistant. Today, a minister has some 20 to 25 exempt staff members in addition to the staff loaned to his or her office by the department to look after documents flowing to and from ministerial offices and other administrative issues of interest to the department. A minister in the Justin Trudeau government has a chief of staff, a deputy chief of staff, a director of operations, a director of policy, a senior policy advisor, two policy advisors, four regional affairs advisors, a director of parliamentary affairs, a senior advisor for issues management, three special assistants and a four-member communications team headed by a director (Ryckewaert, 2022). There was a time when the deputy minister was the minister’s policy advisor. This is no longer the case.

One can ask — what are all these people doing, given that all government departments and agencies also have numerous policy advisors and policy analysts on staff as well as many communications specialists? Ministers and their staff answer the question by simply pointing to the need to counterbalance the advice and work of thousands of career officials. Partisan advisors do not sit idle in their offices — they will want to be relevant by being involved and have influence with their ministers and departments. They also generate work for departmental officials who are the ones called on to answer questions and to provide information to keep ministerial offices informed of new developments. There is only so much influence to go around in departments. Governing from the centre and the growing presence of partisan politicians are eating away at the influence than senior line department officials once had in shaping policy and in managing government operations. It also muddies accountability.

Canada was only half committed to NPM and it was the half that did not work

The Canadian government joined other Anglo-American democracies in the 1980s and 90s pursuing NPM measures. The message to public servants was clear: the public service did not measure up in managing operations and introducing private sector management measures was the key to improving government operations. Government managers were told that they were too bureaucratic, too slow, too ineffective, and their operations too costly, hardly the way to grow confidence among senior public servants. The solution — empower managers and do away with many centrally prescribed rules and regulations (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011).

The Canadian government launched a series of task forces and removed some centrally imposed rules and regulations. It borrowed from reform measures first introduced in the U.K. It established, for example, Special Operating Agencies (SOAs) patterned on the Executive Agencies in the U.K. However, in Canada only a handful was established in contrast to 133 agencies in the U.K. The SOA concept also petered out shortly after it was introduced. The same can be said about NPM measures. One senior federal public servant recently said: “We no longer talk about SOAs in polite company.”⁵ The government, however, has not re-introduced centrally prescribed rules and regulations governing financial and human resources management. The Public Service Commission, for example, has been turned into an audit agency and is no longer involved in the staffing process. This has prompted observers to ask if the merit principle still applies to the extent that it once did (Savoie, 2024).

Accountability requirements have, however, sought to take new forms because of NPM, albeit with little success. Today, there is less reliance on financial audits and assessing if rules governing human and financial resources were respected and more on performance and evaluation reports. Public servants know full well that it is a lot easier to fudge performance reports than financial audits.

The evaluation and performance initiatives have created numerous new positions in the federal government and generated a number of new consultant firms selling expertise in evaluating government pro-

grams. No one, outside of these two groups, is satisfied with their contributions. The Auditor General has consistently been critical of the efforts reporting, for example, that “significant weaknesses continue to limit the contribution of program evaluation to decision making in the government” (Canada, 2013, 9). Evaluation reports are still produced on a regular basis but few, if any, have any influence in developing new policies or in managing government operations. Officials in program evaluation units must think that they are kept busy turning a crank that is not attached to anything.

Senior government officials have little incentive to produce clear, well-documented, and revealing evaluation and performance reports. They know that this would be fraught with political problems, as it would generate material to fuel the blame game. As Doug Hartle, a former Treasury Board official, observed: “It is a strange dog that willingly carries the stick with which it is to be beaten” (Hartle, 1975, 197). No matter, program evaluation efforts eat up a great deal of human and financial resources. It also calls on public servants everywhere to generate information both for program evaluation units in line departments and for central agencies. One deputy minister calls this exercise “feeding the beast” (Savoie, 2015, 195). There was very little need for public servants to feed the beast between 1940 and 1970.

Accountability has not kept pace

New Public Management measures, breaking down departmental silos to promote a whole of government approach, access to information legislation and efforts to make government operations more transparent, the work of public sector unions, the arrival of several Officers of Parliament and the growth of partisan political advisors in government, have had a profound impact on the work of ministers and public servants. When it comes to modernizing accountability requirements, however, the little that has been done has been done on the fly. Governing with porous boundaries is far more complex than governing through a vertical axis, where the line of command is no different from the line of responsibility or accountability. When defining new measures, policy networks need to accept shared responsibility — and the more explicit this responsibility, the better for mak-

ing the politicians accountable for what is accomplished. The question is — how?

Shared responsibility together with the need to generate material for Officers of Parliament and partisan political staffers or “feeding the beast,” have pushed the federal government to establish new executive positions, and more management levels, while adding little new staff to provide front-line services to Canadians. In the early 1970s, 72 percent of federal public servants worked in regional or local offices delivering services. Today, the percentage is getting closer and closer to 50 percent (Savoie, 2024). In 1997 there were 3,011 senior executives employed in the federal public service. Today, there are 7,320 with the bulk of them working in the National Capital Region (Canada, 2002; Canada, 2023f). No one, either at the political or the public service level, has outlined the reasons for this growth.

Shared responsibility requires somehow blending vertical and horizontal accountability requirements with everyone accepting that they have to be accountable for their part, not a given. It also means improving by retaining some elements of the traditional accountability requirements and creating new ones, such as pooled budgets and looking across departments to determine how a comprehensive program agenda was supported. It means having a capacity to dissect collaborative arrangements so as to determine the government’s commitment to them, which departments and, at times, which governments are involved, what their roles are and how we will know if they are living up to their end of the bargain. It also requires a capacity within the government to identify specific tasks and responsibilities in every collaborative arrangement, so that, administrative units, if not individual public servants, have a defined role and responsibility — an ambitious agenda, to be sure. It only takes a moment’s reflection to appreciate that it is a lot easier to shirk accountability under a shared responsibility regime than it is under the traditional model.

Losing its way

The Canadian public service has lost its way, not always by its own doing. Politicians told public servants that when it came to policy, they had too much influence and when it came to management, they

did not measure up. Politicians ignored problems in their own institution, starting with Parliament, essentially arguing that everything wrong with government was the responsibility of the public service. Recall, for example, when former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney pledged, before he came to power, to “give pink slips and running shoes to bureaucrats” (Zussman, 1986, 255). Politicians grabbed the steering wheel on policy and gave a vote of non-confidence to public service when it came to managing operations and, in doing so, knocked the public service off its moorings.

Added to the above has been the need to break down silos to promote a whole of government approach to shape policy and deliver programs. This, in turn, has made government operations much more complicated and less accessible, even to the politicians leading their departments. Audrey Doerr, in her *The Machinery of Government in Canada*, outlined a typical line department up to the 1970s — it had a deputy minister, a chief of staff, an assistant deputy minister responsible for programs, another for policy and a director general responsible for administration, Finance and Human Resources. Today, a typical line department has a deputy minister, an associate deputy minister, a chief of staff, 10 assistant deputy ministers, and several directors (Doerr, 1981, 91-94). If this is lesson from the private sector, it would have been best to ignore it.

What now?

There are voices that would want to tear down the public service rather than support and strengthen it and the federal public service remains an inviting target for those who want to run against the government. Public opinion surveys are reporting on a growing disenchantment with the Canadian public service and politicians and aspiring politicians know well how to read and interpret public opinion surveys.

A strong future for the Canadian public service lies in overhauling how we make the government and the public service accountable. Someone has to answer why it is not possible to deal with non-performers, what can be done about it, why the public service is adding resources in the National Capital Region and not at the point where

Canadians access programs and services, why the number of senior executives have more than doubled over the past twenty-five years, why the federal public service has grown by 25 percent between 2015 and 2021 and why spending on outsourced consultant contracts increased by 41.8 percent during the same period (Clark, 2022). Both politicians and public servants focus too much of their efforts producing announceables that cast the government in a positive light. There is an unwritten code among MPs on the government side and public servants — see no waste in government operations and speak no waste. They leave unattended the more important issue confronting government today — how to strengthen accountability and how the federal government delivers programs and services to Canadians.

The public administration literature has not paid sufficient attention to accountability requirements in government. We focussed on the benefits and shortcomings of NPM measures, but we did not explore fully how the measures would square with traditional accountability requirements nor have we paid enough attention to answer what kind of accountability requirements are now needed. A system of shared accountability requires a new common language and concept and both practitioners and students of government need to attend to this. Unless public servants and the literature begin to address these issues, we are leaving the field open to those who want to grab the levers of political power and enter government with a hatchet in hand and little else. Easy political slogans, such as the deep state and cutting government down to size, are empty solutions.

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NOTES

1. Some of them were former senior federal public servants. See, for example, John A. Munro and Alexis I. Inglis, *Mike: The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Lester B. Pearson, Volume 3: 1957–1968* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975).
2. The surveyors asked 1,536 Canadians about their trust in leaders and institutions. See "'All-time low': Report finds Canadians don't have much trust in government," *Daily Hive*, 9 February 2022.
3. This figure was adjusted to exclude Post Office employees, given that the Department turned into a Crown Corporation. See Canada, *Federal Employment — December 1965* (Ottawa: *Dominion Bureau of Statistics*, vol. 14, no. 12).
4. They are the Auditor General, the Commissioner of Official Languages, the Information Commissioner, the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, the Commissioner of Lobbying, The Parliamentary Budget Officer, the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada, and the Privacy Commissioner of Canada.
5. Consultations with a federal government deputy minister, Ottawa, 23 October 2023.

5

“For Zealous and
Devoted Service
of the Realm”
— a lost ideal?

GÖRAN SUNDSTRÖM

In a Guardian State, bureaucracy will need to be more than neutral; civil servants are agents of the constitution, and neutrality cannot extend to condoning activities that violate constitutional principles.¹

Introduction

SINCE 1803, those who have worked in the Swedish state for 30 years or longer have received the award “For Zealous and Devoted Service of the Realm” (*För nit och redlighet i statens tjänst*, NOR). Today, the recipients of this award can choose between a gold medal, art glass or a gold wristwatch — the latter worth approximately SEK 8,400 (EUR 730, USD 780).

The award is interesting as it highlights two qualities that are supposed to have marked one’s work efforts to deserve the award: zeal and honesty. These are qualities that address basic public values such as objectivity, impartiality, equal treatment and correctness.

During the last 100 years, Swedish civil servants seem to have been quite good at living up to and protecting these values. In international comparisons, the Swedish state administration has fared well when it comes to reputation and trust. And regarding citizens’ trust in the administration, it is precisely the values of objectivity, impartiality, and equal treatment that stand out as crucial for scoring high figures.² During the last 50 years, the Swedish state administration has also worked persistently to improve its service and treatment of citizens. It has become more citizen-friendly, simpler and more comprehensible, which probably has had a positive impact on citizens’ trust in the administration.

Thus, paraphrasing Rousseau,³ “the Social Contract” has functioned quite well in Sweden. So has the contract between politicians and civil servants — “the Public Servant Contract”.⁴ Research

shows that Swedish politicians have perceived the state administration as loyal and knowledgeable and that it has done its best to support the politicians and implement their policies.⁵ Generally, there has been a respectful dialogue between the politicians and the civil servants. Disloyalty, in the form of political activism and opposition to reform, has been exceptions and handled quite smoothly, through various governing measures.

Judging from this, it is reasonable to say that the Swedish state administration has experienced a “Golden Age”, starting around the 1930s. However, in recent years both the Social Contract and the Public Servant Contract — summarized by Hood & Lodge as “the Public Service Bargain”⁶ — have been challenged. Research also shows that trust has begun to fall, albeit slowly and within certain groups, especially among the unemployed, people on long-term sick leave, and right-wing populists.⁷

In this chapter, I highlight two important explanations for this development. The first one has to do with comprehensive administrative reform programs launched in the 1980s and 1990s, and the second with a right wing-government coming into power in 2022, which is heavily dependent on the populist party, the Swedish Democrats.

In the following I first sketch the rise of the state administration’s Golden Age in Sweden. Second, I describe various administrative reforms that were launched in the 1980s and 1990s, and the consequences they have had for the Public Service Bargain. Third, I discuss an important agreement that the present right wing-government has made with the Swedish Democrats — the Tidö-agreement — and how it might affect the Public Service Bargain.

I will argue, not only that the reforms launched in the 1980s and 1990s have been highly problematic in themselves, changing both role perceptions and identities among civil servants and undermining fundamental public values, but also that the reforms have paved the way for reforms now being launched by the Tidö-parties — reforms that are based on distrust and pose a serious threat to the Public Service Bargain.

In a final section, I discuss what can be done to maintain strong civil servants, infused by a broader constitutional ethos, who can act

as “guardians of democracy” and resist reforms posing threats to the Public Service Bargain and liberal democracy.⁸

The rise of the Golden Age

Like many other Western democracies, Sweden’s administration was heavily corrupt and inefficient well into the 19th century. The norms of objectivity, impartiality, and equal treatment, that research shows are important for building a trusting relationship between the state and the citizens, were lacking. The conditions that created this environment were numerous.⁹ It concerned moonlighting (having several jobs) that prevented officials from properly fulfilling their duties, purchases of positions that countered the principle of meritocracy, low competence and education among officials, bribery, a mixing of public and private money, and unequal treatment of citizens.

However, during the years 1840–1870, a series of reforms were implemented within the public sector which led to a significant reduction in corruption.¹⁰ Among the more important changes were a ban on purchasing positions and regulations regarding meritocratic competition for obtaining public employment. Direct payments from citizens to individual officials for services were abolished. More generally, positions were no longer to be seen as the property of the holder but as full-time employment with a fixed salary where a distinction was made between the personal interests of the officeholders and their duties.

In the long term, these reforms formed the basis for a public administration characterized by equality and impartiality, freed from clientelism, corruption, and unpredictability — in essence it was a bureaucratization of the state.¹¹ This created high legitimacy for the state which, according to Rothstein, in turn contributed to a relatively high level of interpersonal social trust among the Swedish citizens, paving the way for democracy and the welfare reforms that would follow during the 20th century.¹²

The welfare state and the social contract

From the 1930s until the 1980s, social democratic governments worked consistently to build “the People’s Home” (*folkhemmet*), where various general welfare systems formed a foundation.¹³ Indeed, the term “the

People's Home" — introduced by social democrat and future Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson in 1928 — even worked as a poetic name for the Swedish welfare state in general. Prime Minister Tage Erlander (1946–1969), continued this policy under another poetic label, "the Strong Society".

In scope and content Hansson's "People's Home" program resembled the 1930s "New Deal" program of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the USA, while Erlander's "Strong Society" program resembled the 1960s "Great Society" program of President Lyndon B. Johnson. The basic idea was that the entire society should be like a big family, where everybody contributes but also where they look after one another. The aim was a democratic welfare society marked by solidarity and harmony, operating on the principle of common spirit and community.

This vision was paired with an already established idea within the Swedish society of each citizen being independent towards other citizens. Thus, no one was to be seen or treated subordinate to anyone else. Instead, all individuals would have the same value and the same rights, which meant that traditional social ties within families and other hierarchical communities were played down. This unusual alliance between the (strong) state and the (autonomous) individual citizen has been termed *Swedish state individualism*.¹⁴

Such a society was only possible to accomplish, the Social Democrats argued, if there were universal social policies within basic policy areas like health insurance, child benefits, pensions, and schools. But it also required a high degree of consensus and mutual understanding. Here, the People's Home became viewed as a midway between capitalism and socialism, caught in the term "the Swedish Model".¹⁵ From the late 1930s this model took the form of a central wage bargaining system between organizations on the labour market, aiming at combining full employment and equity (with a solidaristic wage policy and rules for industrial action, such as lockouts and strikes) with growth and price stability. The Swedish Model fostered a belief that the national interest is best served by co-operation across factional barriers in a spirit of national unity.¹⁶ This in turn meant that political opponents to the right in general did not challenge the welfare state per se, but warned of the costs of some reforms and of tax increases.¹⁷

Of importance is that the general welfare systems that built up the People's Home held within themselves the values of equality, social equity and care for citizens in need. This meant that these values — planted already in the late 19th century — were reinforced and infused even further in the state administration, consolidating and fortifying the civil servants' moral compass.¹⁸ When Neil Elder summarized his study of the Swedish executive, including the administration, at work in 1970 he underlined two characteristics of the Swedish governing style. The first was “the spirit of *saklighet* or ‘matter-of-factness’”, which he rates highly as a “cool, objective and dispassionate approach to questions of public policy”.¹⁹ The other was “the radical rationalistic spirit” marked by an “unemotional reasoned argument to winnow out the best possible solution to any given problem”.²⁰

The public servant contract

In this period — from the early 1930s to the late 1980s — the relationship between the politicians and the civil servants became institutionalized. Generally, this relationship is based on trust. The Swedish state administration is expected to work with a considerable degree of autonomy and in the interest of not only the government of the day but the whole people. Loyalty thus lies in a broad entity, made up by a whole range of constitutional values.²¹

Here, it should be noted, that the Swedish administration does not have the corporately managed structure found in many other liberal democracies. Instead, it has a distinct dualistic nature. The core executive has the form of a formal and clearly delimited organization headed by the Prime Minister — the Government Offices — that employ only about 4,900 people, of which around 200 are politically appointed. The bulk of central government activities, which are typically performed within large ministries in other countries, are in Sweden undertaken in about 370 semi-autonomous state agencies, which together employ around 257,000 people. Furthermore, close to 80 percent of all public employees in Sweden are working in local and regional governments.

The Swedish state agencies are depicted as autonomous not only because they are organizationally separated from the Government Offices but also because the power of the ministers and the government

to issue orders to the agencies is constitutionally circumscribed. This restriction has two components: First, decisions should be taken by collective vote in full Cabinet (at least five ministers need to be present). This means that individual ministers are, as a general rule, prohibited from issuing orders to the agencies under their purview. Secondly and in cases where an agency has the capacity of a public authority, not even the government as a collective or the Parliament may determine how the agency is to adjudicate an individual case or otherwise apply a rule of law. Agencies in such cases are only to be guided by the law.²²

Based on extensive empirical studies the Swedish political scientist Cajsa Niemann²³ has elaborated on the Swedish Public Servant Contract and formulated a set of more precise norms for both the politicians and the civil servants within the core executives; norms that both sides have to follow in order to maintain a trustful relationship between each other. Sundström has also used these norms when studying the relationship between the government and the state agencies.²⁴ Research also shows that the norms governing relationships within the Government Offices have been very stable since at least the 1970s.²⁵

These studies show that the main norm for Swedish *politicians* is to *take overall responsibility* for all activities at all times. This main norm is achieved through three more tangible norms for action. First, they are expected to *respect the administration and use its knowledge*. This includes showing interest in civil servants and involving them in both the design and implementation of policy reforms. Swedish civil servants do not like to be sidestepped. Including the administration is also about getting the civil servants involved in changes. In order for changes to be successful, it is often required that the view of knowledge be revised, and such revisions often take place gradually, via internal processes within the administration.²⁶ By including the administration, the civil servants can gradually “translate” and make reform ideas comprehensible based on their own experiences.

Second, politicians are expected to *act realistically and be available*. They do this by formulating overall visions and goals for the administration. However, they must also be prepared to, if necessary and to the best of their ability, clarify these visions and goals in meetings with

the administration during the course of implementation. And in these meetings, politicians are expected to act pragmatically. They must listen to what the administration has to say and respond to factual arguments. Swedish officials do not like to be run over.

Thirdly, the politicians must *never ever hang out, or blame, civil servants*. If inefficiencies or mistakes are detected, politicians are expected to stand up for the administration — politicians and civil servants are not opponents but co-players in the constant struggle to make improvements and fulfil the government's political aims.

In return for the politicians taking overall responsibility, the main norm for *the civil servants* is to *give the politicians protection*. This is achieved through two more concrete norms. First, Swedish civil servants are expected to *show responsiveness and compliance*. They must make an effort to ensure that the practical implementation of a policy runs smoothly and ends up as close as possible to the wishes and desires of the politicians; although these wishes and desires — due to politicians' limited expertise, political compromises, a reluctance to be precise and a willingness to give the administration room to manoeuvre — most often are vague and full of contradictions. As a civil servant, you do not pursue your own personal agenda.

Second, based on their expertise and experience from practice, civil servants are expected to *provide the politicians with correct information and well-developed data analyses* that can be used for new political decisions and adjustments to previous or ongoing reforms. Civil servants should help politicians make decisions that are appropriate, in terms of both legality and efficiency. Accordingly, it is part of civil servants' loyalty to communicate their views on issues to superiors — including politicians — and to warn them if they think they are acting, or about to act, in a way that the civil servant perceives as illegal, inappropriate or unethical. The civil servant's integrity and responsibility is emphasized. While civil servants are expected to speak out, they are also, however, expected to keep discussions internal within the administration, and to follow orders after being listened too. Only in extra ordinary situations civil servants are expected to blow the whistle.

“The guardians of democracy” — the State administration in the Constitution

The Public Servant Contract fits well with the role that state administration is given in the constitution — the Instrument of Government (*regeringsformen*) (IG) — from 1974. When the present IG was constructed, it was described as a codification work — it was to reflect how things worked in practice, not express a vision of something new.²⁷ This also applied to the state administration. This means that the rules aimed at the administration were to mirror the Public Servant Contract as it was perceived at the time.

With Sweden being a representative democracy, based on the principle of popular sovereignty, the administration is subordinate to the government and must be loyal to it. Thus, the IG states that “All public power in Sweden proceeds from the people” (IG 1:1), that “the Government governs the country” (IG 1:6), and that the “government administrative authorities come under the Government” (IG 12:1).

However, the administration’s duty of obedience towards the government is not limitless. Instead, the administration assumes a power-limiting role in relation to the politicians, which is justified by its special position in the state, where compliance with rules and decisions based on objectivity are underlined in the IG.²⁸

A principle of legality is established in the IG’s first paragraph: “Public power is exercised under the law”. And IG 1:9 states that state agencies “shall pay regard in their work to the equality of all before the law”. Each and every agency also has a judicial review obligation, implying a prohibition to apply provisions, from either the government or Parliament, which contravenes other superior statutes (IG 12:10). Furthermore, and as mentioned above, the administration does not make decisions in matters relating to the exercise of power vis-à-vis an individual “on behalf of the minister”, nor “on behalf of the government”. These matters are not delegated from the government, but the decision-making competence is based on what appears from the law, where decisions are made on behalf only of the state agency at hand (IG 12:2).

The principle of objectivity — aiming at decisions made on reasoning based on expertise and experience of how reforms and public

rules function in practice — is set forth in IG 1:9, stating that agencies in their work “shall observe objectivity and impartiality”. IG 12:5 also stipulates that the main criteria for state employment should be merit (experience gained through previous work) and skill. According to IG 7:2 and IG 10:13 state agencies should also provide the government with information that the government needs for its decision-making — and the government must listen to proposals and criticism coming from the agencies.

These constitutional rules mean that civil servants have a duty to inform. In order to protect the citizens (and the politicians), the administration must “speak truth to power”,²⁹ with integrity, independence and expertise as keywords — state officials should act as “the guardians of democracy”.³⁰ In that sense, the people have tamed themselves through various procedural rules in the IG. This is the meaning of a constitutional democracy. It is a kind of power sharing, not a horizontal one, but a vertical one.³¹

Challenges to the Golden Age

If there ever was a “Golden Age” for the Swedish state administration and its civil servants, it was during the six decades from the early 1930s to the late 1980s. Surely, there were complains about “dull conformity”, with Swedes often demonstrating unsociability and a naive trust in the administration.³² Also, there were complaints about too much red tape and inefficiency.³³ There were also those who argued that parts of the welfare administration built by the Social Democratic government became very closely aligned with the government and almost came to function as a cadre administration.³⁴ But overall, the Swedes put trust in the administration and fared very well during these years, experiencing what came to be called “the record years”.

The Public Service Bargain that emerged during these years was distinctly a trustee-type one, as opposed to an agency-type.³⁵ However, in recent years changes have occurred that put pressure on the trustful relations, both between the administration and the citizens and between the administration and the politicians. Below, I will elaborate on these changes.

New Public Management

From the mid-1980s extensive administrative reforms were launched in Sweden. These reforms — which largely followed the international neo-liberal reform wave called New Public Management (NPM) — were meant to meet critics, claiming that the public sector had become too large and too costly. It was also considered to be rigid and not particularly citizen-oriented. Another criticism was that it had become too complicated and inaccessible, giving public servants too much power at the expense of elected politicians.³⁶

While the late 1980s were characterized by management-oriented reforms, the 1990s was a time of market-oriented reforms.³⁷ Together, these reforms came to fundamentally affect the administration. On the one hand, they brought a more citizen-friendly and service-minded administration, and also a more results-oriented and cost-conscious one. On the other hand, they brought serious challenges to the Public Service Bargain.

Swedish organizational theorists argue that the NPM-oriented reforms have caused a shift from seeing the administration as a set of traditional agencies to a set of formal organizations, modeled after the private company.³⁸ Three changes are highlighted by these scholars.

Firstly, NPM-reforms have strengthened the *individuality* among Swedish state agencies. The introduction of performance management meant that a whole set of concepts were imported from the business sector, which led to the agencies' own operations increasingly coming into focus — concepts like operational goals, result reports, unit costs, indicators and customers. These activities have also been given a strong organizational anchoring in the administration, through economy-oriented agencies, statutes, functions, positions and units. Each and every agency has been assigned its own goals, its own responsibility for results, makes their own annual reports, business plans, etc. At the same time new HR and PR departments have been established in the agencies, where visions, values documents, logos and websites are created to form an attractive image of the organization. Various digital tools aimed at improving the work environment work in the same direction. The tools, that measure the moods of employees,

make it possible for the agency to present — both internally and externally — the image of a prosperous and well-trimmed organization.

Secondly, the establishment of performance management — expressed in the highly cherished governing model Management by Results (MBR) — means a focus on *goal rationality*. This means that goals and performance requirements are to be formulated for all agencies, and the goals should be clearly specified and broken down at different levels so that each and every department and unit, and even individual employees, are given their own goals and performance requirements. At these levels, various options for action should be considered and then chosen based on set goals.

Thirdly, the NPM-reforms have nursed a strong belief in *leadership*. Straight lines of command and responsibility have been emphasized. It must be clear who is responsible for what, and who will bear the responsibility when goals and performance requirements are not achieved. As an employee, you should be loyal to the management, and be led by goals documents and business plans decided by management. As a manager, it is important to clarify priorities, connecting skills and building effective teams, and “coaching” the employees. As an employee, you should be both guided and inspired by the manager. Therefore, qualities such as social competence, charisma and image are highly valued.³⁹ In order to give the managers room to manoeuvre, the government has delegated a number of important decisions to management — the Director Generals — such as where to locate the agency, how to organize it internally and appointing heads within the agency.

In sum, there has been a displacement from the traditional agency towards the formal and business-like organization. The *identity* has shifted, from a sense of community, where you see yourself as just another agency among others and part of something bigger, to a sense of individuality, where you mark boundaries and your autonomy vis-à-vis the outside world and try to be unique and outstanding by strengthening your “brand”. The *decision-making* has shifted, from a logic of rules, where you ask what kind of situation you are in and what formal rule applies to that situation, and then follow the rule that best fits the situation, to a logic of consequences, where you formulate a goal, consider as many options as possible, evaluate and com-

pare these options with each other, and choose the option that best fulfils the goal. And *responsibility* has shifted, from the civil servant’s own personal responsibility, where you as a civil servant have a healthy critical attitude towards superiors and are prepared to “speak truth to power” based on the principles of legality and objectivity and a loyalty to the citizens, to leadership, where you are loyal to your organization, expressed in goals and result requirements set by the management and your superior (see figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1
Consequences of NPM-reforms in an organizational perspective

	State Agency	Formal Organization
Identity:	Community	Individuality
Decision-making:	Rule following	Goal rationality
Responsibility:	Personal responsibility	Leadership

Certainly, this displacement has not been equally prominent within all three dimensions, and not equally prominent within all policy areas and within all agencies,⁴⁰ but on an aggregated level the displacement is apparent.

The development has affected role-perceptions and identities among civil servants, and it has brought a shift in focus from basic democratic values (political democracy, legality and public ethics) towards economic values (functional rationality, cost-effectiveness and productivity).⁴¹ It is noteworthy that this shift occurred despite the economic values completely lacking support in the IG.

Two negative consequences for the Public Service Bargain have followed from this shift. Firstly, the emphasis on a more controllable and compliant administration has led to parts of the administration becoming increasingly reluctant to “speak truth to power”. Critics claim that the emphasis on line management and strong leadership — and a stronger focus on competition — has made many civil servants feel that the ceiling has become lower. There is today a widespread fear of reprisals, which has made officials more passive and subservient. The

administration has become more silent and does not dare to put forward its professionally based views in the same way as before.⁴²

Secondly, the view of state agencies as business-like and line-managed organizations has affected the civil servant's compliance with, and respect for, formal rules. The agencies are led by "managers" who increasingly see agencies as their own fiefdoms,⁴³ who are tasked with achieving goals and result requirements formulated in documents with unclear legal status.

What we are witnessing is a hierarchy of rules that is about to be turned upside down, where goals documents, strategies, memoranda, action plans, agreements and informal dialogues take more and more space while laws and other formal statutes become less important. Generally, the administrative law perspective has been pushed aside.⁴⁴ Various "affairs" and "scandals" in the last 10–20 years, in which high civil servants have been involved, bear witness to this development. "Swedish agencies often seem to find it difficult to follow laws, rules and routines", law scholar Richard Sannerholm sums up after thoroughly analyzing these affairs and scandals.⁴⁵

This development means that the administration's inclination and ability to protect the politicians have weakened. Some of the "affairs" and "scandals" have come at a high price to government, and several ministers and state secretaries have been forced to leave office due to actions taken, or not taken, by higher civil servants.

The Tidö-Regime

Thus, NPM-oriented reforms launched in the 1980s and 1990s have changed the Swedish state administration, evoking problematic behaviours among civil servants that have affected the Public Service Bargain, and which might mark the end of "the golden age" — or at least the beginning of the end of such an era. And this change concerns both the Public Servant Contract and the Social Contract, the latter being affected foremost by a far-reaching marketization of various public services during the 1990s and strong ideas of competition, individuality and self-realization — ideas that are not always easy to combine with the values central to "the People's Home", namely equality, social equity and care for citizens in need.

However, the NPM-reforms were not launched because of low trust in the administration. Rather, the aim was to demonstrate a firm grip by politicians on achieving better results and more efficiency in order to appease criticism against the administration.⁴⁶ In 2022, however, a new government came into power in Sweden. This government consists of three traditional right wing-parties, but it is heavily dependent on the Swedish Democrats. Once the party made it into Parliament in 2010, it strengthened its support and is now (2025) the second largest political party in Parliament.

The Swedish Democrats are a populist, xenophobic and nationalist party. Like populist parties in general the Swedish Democrats promote a politics of fear,⁴⁷ pitching a self-seeking elite against the people, whose real interests can only be discovered and translated into political action by the populists.⁴⁸ This self-seeking elite — depicted by Social Democratic party leader Jimmi Åkesson as “the left-liberal goo”⁴⁹ — is to a considerable extent seen as made up of higher civil servants, not to be trusted.⁵⁰

The Swedish Democrats do not have any ministerial posts, but the government has signed a comprehensive and detailed agreement with the party — the Tidö Agreement. Several of the proposals in the agreement are being implemented as this is written or are under inquiry, and if implemented as planned, they will increase the pressure on the Public Service Bargain.

The *Social Contract* is challenged because the agreement focuses on a specific group of people. It is dominated by migration and crime prevention. And these two issues are repeatedly linked. For example, the state is to map “how many foreign citizens are active gang criminals” and increase the number of internal border controls to combat “irregular migration and cross-border crime.” Proposals are also to be developed for the revocation of citizenship for those who commit crimes and the right for police to make baseless searches in specific areas. “Return activities”, aiming at sending emigrants back to their home countries, are also to be strengthened and prioritized.

At the same time, a general “reporting obligation” is to be introduced, where the administration is to ensure individuals’ legal right to stay in Sweden and inform the Swedish Migration Agency and the Police if they discover individuals without such rights. This obligation

is to be paired with a new main rule in the Secrecy legislation, which means that every state agency must share all relevant information concerning a citizen with law enforcement authorities.

The overall implication of all these proposals is that the administration should become more proactive in policing in order to address migrants. And it is not just public authorities like the Police and Customs that should more actively and systematically scrutinize migrants. Even schools, social services, the Migration Agency, the Employment Service, the Social Insurance Agency, the Tax Agency, healthcare, and others should more actively, and on their own initiative, carry out identity checks and provide information to crime preventing authorities. It is in this light that a large-scale national census announced in the Tidö Agreement can be seen. The census, together with the new reporting obligations, will become the state's hunt for people who can be deported. Notably, in this census the Swedish Democrats want to use "un-announced dawn raids" on suspected addresses.⁵¹

In practice, the Tidö Agreement attributes a certain propensity (to engage in criminal activity) to a specific group of people (migrants). And this depiction of the problem forms the basis for actions aimed at tracking and controlling these migrants prone to crime. This contradicts the strong norm of equal treatment that is central to the Swedish Social Contract. Not only will the authorities need to use racial profiling — to reduce identity checks and increase their accuracy — but for migrants there are also supposed to be other, more ambiguous, grounds for authoritative decision-making than those applied to other societal groups, such as the ability to deport migrants based on only suspicion of crime or a general "lack of good conduct". The latter has been criticized for entailing restrictions on freedom of speech for people living in Sweden with residence permits.⁵² Additionally, the government has raised the wage floor for immigrants from 13,000 SEK per month to 26,560 SEK. This means that workers from a non-EU country offered a salary below this floor will not be granted a work permit. Critics argue that this legislative change challenges the Swedish model of labour market cooperation and collective agreements.⁵³

This differential treatment of a group of people will place a significant strain on the Social Contract. Surely, the civil servants recognize the risk that people not targeted by these measures will increasingly

perceive migrants as a problem if authorities begin to systematically control them. At the same time, there is a risk that the people's trust in the administration will decrease when they perceive that the crucial principle of equal treatment is being deviated from.

Especially for welfare agencies, the demands for a more policing role will, the occupational professionals argue, entail significant strain and ethical stress.⁵⁴ Not only because it is primarily these agencies that have worked to get closer to those most vulnerable and in most need by showing them trust and respect, but also because it is part of their profession to help and support, not to track down and expose people. And the effect? Well, anxious parents with children on the verge of delinquency will most likely be less inclined to contact social services. Indeed, personnel within the healthcare sector have already created a website called "We Do Not Report",⁵⁵ where care workers can leave their signature in protest against the proposed "Reporting law".

The *Public Servant Contract* is also challenged by the Tidö Agreement. Especially criticized is a proposal for strengthened accountability for public officials.⁵⁶ Representatives of the Tidö parties argue that this is needed because the administration is inefficient, corrupt, and full of political activists.⁵⁷ Certainly, there are cases of inefficiency and inappropriate behavior among Swedish civil servants.⁵⁸ However, such a general description of the Swedish state administration finds no support in research. Instead, critics argue that recurring budget cuts, particularly affecting core operations, have made it increasingly difficult to maintain quality in the daily work of teachers, healthcare professionals, social workers, etc.⁵⁹

Instead of highlighting these poor conditions the Tidö parties cast suspicion on public officials, the critics argue.⁶⁰ The administration feels slandered and risks becoming increasingly timid and passive as the relationship between politicians and civil servants becomes more hierarchical, taking the form of strict order giving rather than communication and ideas exchange.⁶¹

Actual changes in this direction have already been noted. For example, director generals and board members in state agencies have been replaced in a manner that critics argue implies politicization of the administration.⁶² Especially worrying is the government's attack on education, public broadcasting and culture. The critics claim that

the long-standing governing principle of “arm’s length” within these areas is eroding, as control has increased and funding decreased.⁶³

The government has also taken decisions and implemented various changes targeted at the agencies without first consulting them. Some of these decisions have been very far-reaching for the agencies, and sometimes even involved the closure of entire agencies.⁶⁴ More generally, when developing and implementing its policies the present government does not use the administration’s knowledge and expertise to the same extent as before. This is partly explained, the critics argue, by the government not trusting the administration. Specifically, civil servants feel accused of not making an effort in their work to assist the government in realizing its policies; of working too slowly or even of opposing the government.⁶⁵

Indeed, in a speech to the officials in the Government Offices, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson has recently declared: “What we do affects the whole of Sweden and must be carefully prepared. However, thoroughness is not an excuse for slowness. On the contrary, speed has its own value. Not only in sports and in business. We must demonstrate that change is possible”.⁶⁶

This message did not resonate well with civil servants. They interpreted it as the government wanting officials to cut corners and prioritize speed over correctness and take actions that are the quickest, rather than those that are the best and ultimately yield most impact. Legislative changes are perceived as rushed, which creates frustration among the civil servants.⁶⁷

The professional knowledge of the administration being less used by the government has partly been explained by the so-called contract parliamentarism that has become more common in Sweden.⁶⁸ The concept refers to agreements that the government has been forced to sign with various supporting parties due to increasingly complex parliamentary situations. The Tidö Agreement is the most far-reaching example of this. Here, it is established, quite in detail, how various policy areas should be reformed — before the issues have been properly investigated. Thus, the administration is faced with a *fait accompli*. The question has been raised whether the government, through this type of decision-making, is violating its constitutionally mandated requirement (IG 7:2) to consult the agencies before making its deci-

sions.⁶⁹ Regardless, this reverse order, where decisions are made first and then followed by shorter inquiries, results in the expertise of the administration not being fully utilized.

How deep is the Swedish state?

Overall, the Tidö Agreement risks bringing about significant changes in the Swedish state, accelerating a transformation from a strong welfare state committed to equal treatment of citizens (based on a trustee-type of Public Service Bargain), towards a subdued and discriminatory informant state with weakened legitimacy (based on an agency-type of Public Service Bargain).

How will the Swedish civil servants react when the values of equal treatment, legality, and objectivity — values crucial not only for the established Public Service Bargain but for liberal democracy more generally — are undermined? Will they act as “guardians of democracy” and engage in a “guerilla government”⁷⁰ by raising concerns towards their superiors, by whistle blowing, or perhaps even by sabotaging, or will they instead leave the sinking ship? Or will they fall back to the residual alternative, loyalty, and faithfully implement the policies of “unprincipled principals”?⁷¹

The starting point is somewhat worrying, as the intense use of NPM-reforms has, as discussed above, altered the civil servants’ mindset, making them more timid and silent and less prone to show integrity and follow formal rules. In that sense, NPM has paved the way for development, nowadays described by researchers as democratic backsliding — today the civil servants seem to be less prone to protect values and institutions central to liberal democracy than they were a few decades ago.⁷²

Furthermore, Swedish civil servants are not accustomed to firmly opposing politicians. As mentioned earlier, the Swedish Public Servant Contract has been characterized by harmony and trust. In modern times, Swedish politicians have not attacked ingredients crucial to liberal democracy. In this respect, Swedish civil servants are untested. Here, the uprising against the proposed “Informant law” is encouraging. So is the massive criticism against a changed salary policy

within the Government Offices decided in December 2023, which critics argue entails a far-reaching politicization of the civil servants.⁷³

Thus, “guerilla government” actions have already been spotted, which may signal that the norms building up the Swedish Public Service Bargain are robust and will not give way that easily. However, despite these signs of courage and resistance recent developments should give pause for thought. While the relationship between the citizens and the administration, and between the politicians and the civil servants, may still be quite good, trust in these relationships is under pressure and can quickly be undermined if the values underpinning them are further weakened. Ultimately, the vertical separation of powers risks waning — there may no longer be any strong civil servants to warn politicians when they are about to act illegally, inappropriately, or unethically.

So, what can be done to ensure a continued strong administration marked by integrity? One suggested idea is to strengthen the administration’s formal autonomy in relation to politicians.⁷⁴ However, as discussed above, Swedish state agencies’ formal autonomy is already very far-reaching. Formal autonomy does not seem to be the main problem in Sweden.

Another frequently suggested idea is to try to strengthen the administration through various types of education and training. Both researchers and public commissioners argue that the civil servants need to better understand the meaning of working in the state and that they need to be taught the demands that come with the position.⁷⁵ However, even though education and training is in need, it will not be enough. It should be noted that many of those who have acted incorrectly in recent years’ scandals and affairs have been very experienced civil servants, well acquainted with administrative law. They have not been lacking knowledge about formal rules. Instead, they have carried out their actions “because they wanted to and could, and because there was a lack of an ‘inner voice’ that reminded them of the values of the rule of law”, Sannerholm concludes in his study of these events.⁷⁶

I argue, that these reprehensible behaviors can foremost be explained by the displacement in role perceptions and identities, from the traditional agency, run by rule-following civil servants, to the business-like organization, run by goal-seeking managers. Consequently,

if we want to uphold the order with strong civil servants, the government needs to take measures that push back role perceptions and identities towards the traditional agency.

Here, I concur with Olsen who already in 2005 claimed that “maybe it is time to rediscover bureaucracy”.⁷⁷ This should not be interpreted as a nostalgic attempt to rebuild state institutions exactly like they were before, but rather to highlight fundamental principles and values that has been pushed aside and try to restore the traditional agency in a new, modern, way.⁷⁸

For that purpose, the administrative reform policy’s strong emphasis on NPM ideas must end. There is a need for an administrative reform policy that is characterized by a significantly deeper and broader understanding of what kind of organization the state administration is. Based on this, the policy needs to develop greater pluralism and an openness to alternative ways of governing and organizing, based on different public values, which brings back focus on basic principles like respect, fairness, integrity, objectivity and equality — and an insight that not only performance but also processes matter.⁷⁹

This requires thoughtful (re)organization of the policy area of administrative reform policy.⁸⁰ The government needs to ensure that all governance and organizational issues are given attention, contemplation, support, and development, not only those connected to NPM. The renewal and development work needs to be characterized by broader, more open, and more egalitarian discussions, grounded in both the democratic values and the economic values that underpin the public ethos. This entails the construction of new institutions (agencies, legislation, units, positions, language) that help civil servants to actively protect and promote democratic values — and a downplaying of institutions that support economic values, not because economic values and various NPM-techniques are unimportant, but because they need to be balanced.

The prize “For Zealous and Devoted Service of the Realm” has been awarded for 222 years in Sweden. It has expressed an important ideal for state officials to strive for. It is time for the government to stress the importance of this ideal, and to take measures to strengthen the values behind it — otherwise, the prize risks becoming an anachronism.

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6

The end of the 'Golden Age' for the civil service in Germany?

SYLVIA VEIT

Introduction

WHEN WAS THE 'GOLDEN AGE' of the public sector in Germany? This is difficult to pinpoint, as bureaucratic administrative organizations based on Max Weber's model have a long tradition in Germany. Today's core principles and structures of the civil service date back to the second half of the 18th century in Prussia. During this period, the principles fundamental to German bureaucracy today were established. A bureaucratic system was developed in which civil servants served the public interest and the King with Prussian virtues such as loyalty, diligence, punctuality, neutrality, parsimony, and incorruptibility (Caplan 1988). In the subsequent century, the civil servants of the German Empire cultivated a mindset in which they viewed themselves as loyal servants to the state, particularly to the reigning Emperor, and as a counterbalance to political parties and trade unions (Strobel and Veit 2021), which had become more influential during the second half of the 19th century. The first democratic republic in Germany was established with the founding of the Weimar Republic in 1918 after the end of the First World War. The neutral bureaucracy in Germany, organized according to Weberian principles, is therefore a product of the monarchy, while democracy was established later. This made it very difficult to install democratic values among civil servants in the Weimar Republic. Many civil servants remained mentally anchored in the monarchy well into the 1930s, rejecting the political changes and instability associated with democracy in the Weimar Republic. Consequently, many supported the dismantling of democratic institutions, a process that had already begun before Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933 and was quickly completed under his regime. A genuine anchoring of democratic values in the administration only took place after the Second World

War in the western part of Germany with the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949. In contrast, the eastern part of the country saw the establishment of a communist autocratic regime in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which lasted until 1989/1990.

From this historical perspective, the ‘Golden Age’ of the civil service — characterized by its influential position in policymaking based on legality, professional standards, and truthfulness, but also on political responsiveness (Christensen and Opstrup 2018) — can only be a phenomenon of the last few decades in Germany. The question now is whether this ‘Golden Age’ has already come to an end today, because in Germany, as in many other advanced democracies, we are observing phenomena such as increasing politicization and externalization in policymaking (van den Berg 2017), possibly hollowing out the traditional role of the professional civil service? This question will be discussed in this chapter. The core hypothesis is that although there are numerous dynamics of change in policymaking, the advisory role of the German ministerial bureaucracy remains significant. Moreover, their professional and meritocratic character has remained largely intact despite an increase in the politicization of top civil servants over the last decades.

The chapter is divided into three main sections based on three central characteristics associated with the “Golden Age” of the civil service — namely its a) characterization as a body of primarily meritocratic appointment, b) its role as the prime policy adviser to executive politicians, speaking ‘truth to power’, and c) its function as the backbone to democracy. For each of these areas, the chapter discusses their development over time and assesses the current situation. Finally, a conclusion is drawn, and current research perspectives as well as open research questions are discussed.

The civil service as a body of meritocratic appointment

A rather strict separation of the political and the administrative spheres has long been a fundamental feature of the civil service in Germany. Historically, this separation was established during the German Empire and maintained during the Weimar Republic

(1918–1933). The main legal foundation for civil servants during the Weimar Republic, the civil service law, dated back to 1873 and was last amended in 1907. This law established life tenure, a special loyalty to the state, diligence and adherence to rules, and incorruptibility as professional standards for all civil servants. Thus, the Weberian ideal of an impartial, rule-oriented, and professional civil service was deeply anchored in the relevant legal provisions both in the German Empire and in the Weimar Republic (Strobel and Veit 2021).

Nonetheless, the right of ministers to intervene in personnel decisions in the administrative sphere was not fully constrained. Both the Chancellor in the German Empire and the ministers in the Weimar Republic had the right to hire and fire so-called ‘political civil servants’ — i.e. top civil servants in the two highest hierarchical ranks in central state ministries — at their own discretion by placing them into ‘temporary retirement’ at any time (Jann and Veit 2021). However, in all lower hierarchical positions, the merit principle was the main recruitment standard for civil servants (Kordt 1938).

During the Nazi-regime (1933–1945), the separation of civil servants and politicians was greatly weakened. At the organizational level, party-dominated parallel structures to the state bureaucracy were created. Additionally, new ministries were set up to fulfil particularly important tasks for the regime (Strobel 2022). At the individual level, a comprehensive politicization of the civil service took place, which was associated with a considerable (Mommensen 1966, 39), but by no means complete (Veit 2024, 132–133; 138–139), exchange of personnel. Following the death of the then German President Paul von Hindenburg in August 1934, civil servants were required to swear their oath of allegiance directly to Hitler rather than to the constitution (Koops 2008). Positions in ministries were increasingly filled with ‘loyal fighters’ (*Alte Kämpfer*) and ‘early friends’ (*Frühe Freunde*), who had been members of Hitler’s National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP) already in its founding years in the early 1920s (Veit 2024, 191). Many civil servants who had served in the civil service during the Weimar Republic, and even the German Empire, continued their service after Hitler’s rise to power, choosing to align themselves with the new regime and serve it faithfully. This highlights the darker aspect of a tradition emphasizing loyalty and neutrality within the civil service, where

democratic values struggled to find a foothold. Hitler effectively relied on this operational civil service to enact his policies, encountering little resistance from within its ranks as he pursued his political agenda (Strobel and Veit 2021).

After the destruction of the Hitler regime and the transitional phase of the occupation, the Federal Republic of Germany was founded in 1949 and a new constitution, the Basic Law, was adopted. Like the Weimar Republic, the Federal Republic is a parliamentary democracy and a federal state. Concerning the relationship between politics and administration, the Federal Republic took up the traditions of Prussia, the German Empire, and the Weimar Republic. Administrative structures remained largely unchanged in many cases, the legal foundations of the civil service were based on traditional rules and principles, and the establishment of an administration governed by the rule of law was to be the focus of the young Federal Republic. The institution of ‘political civil servants’ was also revived: in addition to the meritocratic civil service, selected positions at the top of the administrative hierarchy were to be filled with ‘political civil servants’. These positions include the two top administrative levels in federal ministries — administrative state secretaries and directors-general. Filling these positions is in the hands of the respective ministers, and political criteria play a significant role for their selection (Bach and Veit 2018; Veit and Vedder 2023). This basic architecture has not changed to this day (Jann and Veit 2021).

A special feature of the German case in international comparison is certainly that the existence of a meritocratic system is not seen as contradictory to a pronounced functional politicisation of the ministerial bureaucracy (see also section 3) and to a high tolerance of private party-political involvement by civil servants (Jann and Veit 2021). Civil servants in Germany are not only allowed to be party members, but they can also hold party offices, serve as council members at the local level, and even run for parliamentary mandates at the state, federal, or European levels. If they are successful in the latter, their civil servant status is suspended for the duration of the parliamentary term. As will be explained in more detail in section 4, this pronounced openness to civil servants’ party-political engagement was explicitly desired after the experiences of the Hitler regime. During that time,

the neutrality of the Weberian civil service and its lack of identification with democratic values had proven to be highly problematic (Jann and Veit 2021, 2015).

It was mentioned in the introduction of this book that increasing politicization has been observed in many advanced democracies in recent years. Is this also the case in Germany? Has the principle of meritocratic selection and promotion of civil servants been increasingly marginalized here, with political criteria playing a greater role in personnel selection today than in the past? To answer this, it is important to differentiate between ‘political civil servants’ on the one hand and career civil servants on the other.

For ‘political civil servants’ in the federal ministries, constituting a small group of around 150 individuals, it is legally permissible to consider political criteria and personal loyalty into account alongside meritocratic standards when making appointment decisions. Empirical studies have consistently shown a high proportion of party members in this group (Derlien 2003; Bach and Veit 2018). There has been a notable shift in their career trajectories over time: nowadays, ‘political civil servants’ more frequently pursue career paths that involve positions in or adjacent to the political sphere (Veit and Vedder 2023). Such positions include, for example, working as staff for political parties and parliamentary groups or serving in leadership staff units of federal ministries. However, they typically do not involve professional experience as an executive politician or parliamentarian, which remains relatively uncommon for ‘political civil servants’ in Germany (Strobel et al. 2021). Nonetheless, some individuals transition to such roles at the state level leaving their position as ‘political civil servant’. The career paths of ‘political civil servants’ increasingly differ from those of other senior civil servants. This development has been interpreted as politicization, but also represents a professionalization because their role at the interface between politics and administration requires certain skills which cannot be acquired in a classical administrative career (Veit and Vedder 2023). The leadership staff units in the German ministries, which have been expanded since the 1980s (Hustedt 2013), have become a typical stepping stone to a position as ‘political civil servant’ (Schröter 2004; Veit and Scholz 2016; Veit and Vedder 2023).

In the case of career civil servants, politicization has not been on the rise over the last decade. On the contrary, according to findings from recent rounds of the Political-Administrative Elite (PAE) survey — a survey regularly assessing the attitudes of senior civil servants in Germany on various topics, including patronage and politicized appointments (Beneke et al. 2023) — there appears to be a slight decrease. In the 2021 PAE survey, 37 per cent of responding senior civil servants from federal ministries reported an increase in patronage appointments, a decline from over 50 per cent eight years earlier. Additionally, PAE data from 2021 indicates a notable reduction in the percentage of senior civil servants who consider party-political criteria important for appointing heads of directorates in federal ministries. While in 2013, 76 per cent held this view, the proportion dropped to considerably less than 40 per cent in 2021. In all PAE rounds, ‘previous professional experience’ and ‘performance in previous positions’ have consistently been rated as significantly more important than party-political criteria for appointment decisions of senior civil servants, such as head of directorate or section head (own analysis of PAE data). Informal discussions with former ministerial officials also suggest that ministers exert less influence on senior civil service appointments today than in the past (see also Veit 2025).

In summary, it can be concluded that the trend towards more politicized appointments in the civil service in Germany primarily pertains to the very small group of ‘political civil servants’ occupying top administrative positions and does not seem to extend to other senior civil service positions. However, further research is necessary to delve into this matter more thoroughly. The reasons behind the increasing decoupling of ‘political civil servants’ from career civil servants in Germany stem from shifts in the political and societal environment: traditional links between parties and social groups have weakened, parties now vie for votes based more on issues, populist parties — such as the right-wing populist party *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) or the newly founded left-wing *Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht* (BSW) — have gained traction, leading to a more diverse party system and a more conflictual political sphere. Additionally, crises and major challenges such as the financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and mass migration require urgent attention from

politicians, while simultaneously political elites face dwindling acceptance from larger segments of society. Furthermore, political communication and media work have changed significantly within “an increasingly aggressive and fast-paced media context” (Salomonsen, Flinders, and Hustedt 2024). The support services and advice that ministers require for their work have undergone significant changes (e.g., Aucoin 2012; Grube 2019). The dynamics of change within ‘political civil servants’ (and the leadership staff) units in Germany, characterized here as politicization and professionalization, should be viewed as a functional adaptation to these shifts. Describing this transformation simply as political patronage would be inadequate, as it would overlook its functional aspect, which plays a crucial role in the operation of modern democratic systems.

The civil service as the prime policy adviser

In the previous section, it was noted that the changing environment in which politicians operate has led to an increasing selection of ‘political civil servants’ with backgrounds closely tied to politics, bringing with them the skills acquired in those spheres into office. This raises several questions regarding the role of civil servants as political advisors. Firstly, it prompts considerations of whether the politicized environment in which ministerial civil servants operate still allows room for impartial policy advice in the spirit of “speaking truth to power” (Wildavsky 1979), along with the capacity for loyal dissent if necessary (van der Meer and Dijkstra 2021). Secondly, it raises the question of whether the professional competence of civil servants has undergone changes; for instance, whether there has been a decline in educational standards, or if there have been shifts in typical fields of study or educational institutions. Lastly, the discussion must encompass whether the civil service continues to function as primary policy adviser to ministers.

Regarding the first question, it should be noted that empirical investigation into this matter is inherently challenging. The definition of ‘neutral advice’ and ‘truth’ is subjective and varies depending on the perspective. Therefore, empirical studies on this topic often focus on the role perceptions of civil servants rather than analyzing the ac-

tual advisory content or their actual behaviour in policy advice and decision-making processes. Research findings on the Federal Republic of Germany have long pointed to the pronounced functional politicization of ministerial civil servants in the country (Derlien and Mayntz 1989; Ebinger and Schmitt 2010): “It [functional politicization] implies a greater sensitivity of civil servants for considerations of political feasibility, and institutes a kind of political self-control of top bureaucrats through their anticipation of the reactions of the cabinet and of parliament to their policy proposals and legislative drafts” (Derlien and Mayntz 1989, 402). More recent research findings point to continuity in this regard (Salomonsen, Flinders, and Hustedt 2024; Ebinger, Veit, and Strobel 2022). Despite the high level of functional politicization and political responsiveness, civil servants in the ministries today, as in the past, identify most strongly with their roles as experts and initiators of new projects and problem solutions. They see themselves primarily as representatives of the state and implementers of political goals. They cannot identify strongly with the partisan role or the role as agent for specific organized interests (Veit and Ebinger 2024; Ebinger, Veit, and Strobel 2022). In their actual decision-making behaviour, senior civil servants in Germany strive to act both responsive (to the minister) and responsible (towards the public interest) (Ebinger, Veit, and Fromm 2019).

In addition to the question of the *willingness* to point out aspects in the policy process that are problematic for the political goals of the minister and the government, the *ability* to provide sound advice is equally relevant when assessing the role of the civil service in policy advice. This ability depends on civil servants’ substantive and methodological expertise and is discussed under the heading of ‘policy analytical capacity’. According to Howlett (2015), ‘policy analytical capacity’ “is an important component of overall policy capacity, bringing together individual level analytical skills (competencies) and resources (capabilities) needed for the systematic evaluation of policy alternatives and practices”. It can be defined as “knowledge of policy substance and analytical techniques and communication skills at the individual level” (Michael Howlett 2018, 52). Data on policy analytical capacity within the civil service in different countries is rare (Michael Howlett 2018), and this is also true for the German case. A typical indicator of high

policy analytical capacities is an academic degree, possibly complemented by research experience gained during doctoral studies. This holds true for senior civil servants in Germany to a large extent. All senior civil servants in the country possess at least a Master's degree, and a considerable number holds a doctorate, although there has been a decline in the latter. The percentage of administrative state secretaries and directors-general with a doctorate stood at 70 per cent during the founding years of the Federal Republic and has since decreased to around 40 per cent in German federal ministries (Strobel et al. 2021, 14). Even within lower ranks, the proportion of individuals with doctorates remains significantly higher than in the general population.

For a long time, the premise in Germany was that lawyers were particularly well suited to work in the senior civil service due to their generalist training. This view has a lot to do with the nature of the rule of law in Germany and the established legalistic administrative culture. In recent years, the monopoly on lawyers has slowly dissolved and other specialists have found their way into the ministries, especially in specialized and more technical ministries such as environment, or transport. For senior civil servants, however, the proportion of lawyers is still around 50 per cent (Strobel et al. 2021, 18; Beneke et al. 2023). Traditionally, there are no elite universities or elite degree programmes to train the administrative elite in Germany, and this has not changed in recent decades (Strobel et al. 2021, 24).

Although senior civil servants in German ministries are highly politicized in terms of their functions and support the minister in pushing through his agenda, at the same time fundamental professional values are deeply rooted and there is a high level of substantial policy expertise. To conceal technical aspects, even if they are politically problematic, would contradict the professional self-image of civil servants. It can therefore be assumed that, in practice, competent and honest advice is given to ministers, albeit usually behind closed doors. The following pattern is typical of the German case: senior civil servants advise the minister and anticipate his demand for politically enforceable policy options that have already been coordinated with other actors in advance. They point out problematic aspects in a confidential consultation and, if necessary, document them in administrative files but would not publicly contradict the minister.

Ministerial civil servants, especially those occupying high hierarchical positions, enjoy privileged access to the minister. Consequently, they have frequently been characterized in the literature as the minister's primary policy advisers, a description that still holds true for Germany albeit with some qualifications. On the one hand, civil servants within the leadership staff units have increased in significance within the internal advisory system by pre-assessing, evaluating, and prioritizing proposals submitted to the minister (Hustedt 2018). However, as the leadership staff units in Germany are part of the civil service, this development should not be understood as a change in the general role of the civil service in policymaking, but rather concerns the distribution of competences and power within ministries. On the other hand, the externalization issue is also being discussed for Germany. The use of management consultancies has increased in Germany — as in many other countries — since the 1990s, albeit often in connection with administrative reforms and digitalization and less frequently in the context of policymaking and regulation in other areas. Overall, the utilization of external policy advisers such as consultancies or law firms for drafting policies and legislative proposals is not extensive, and the criticism occasionally voiced in the media that the federal ministries have become alarmingly dependent on external expertise cannot be substantiated (Döhler 2012; Beneke and Döhler 2021). However, policy workers within the ministries extensively rely on internal sources of advice when formulating policy proposals and drafting laws, often seeking input from governmental research agencies, or other federal entities (Veit, Hustedt, and Bach 2017). In addition, external expertise undoubtedly plays a crucial role in policymaking, and ministries frequently seek advice from various external stakeholders to develop policy proposals and draft laws (Beneke and Döhler 2021). Senior civil servants thus serve in dual roles as both advisors to the minister and recipients of advice. This unique position can also be described as serving as the prime advisers to ministers. However, it is important to note that there are exceptions to this general scenario, and external actors are utilized to a greater extent for specific policy issues.

The civil service as the backbone of democracy

Despite a consensus among scholars on the utility and necessity of a politically responsive senior civil service to steer and control the bureaucracy, the acceptance of politicization as a behavioural aspect varies greatly across countries (Ebinger, Veit, and Fromm 2019). For instance, in Westminster countries, giving tactical advice to the minister is seen as the task of political/ministerial advisers whereas civil servants are expected to act as neutral experts who give 'free and frank advice' to the minister (Shaw and Eichbaum 2018). From this perspective, politicization is considered first and foremost as a risk for democracy: a politicized civil service would serve mainly the government (or minister) of the day instead of the public good. When authoritarian politicians enter government offices, a politicized civil service would be easy to control and to (mis)use for non-democratic political actions. Organizing public administration and in particular political-administrative relations in a way that ensures competency and safeguards the public interest and democracy is an important political task. A meritocratic civil service, over which politicians have only limited influence, is therefore regarded as the backbone of democratic state models.

While the literature primarily describes the existing risks of politicization, the aspect that a neutral, Weberian civil service also has certain downsides of its own is often neglected. German history during the Nazi regime shows that impartial civil servants are not automatically the backbone of democracy but can also serve autocratic rulers loyally and efficiently. History also shows that the Weberian civil service could be politicized quite smoothly by the new rulers in 1933 and 1934. This was one of the main reasons why the founding fathers of the Federal Republic of Germany established a system allowing civil servants to engage in party political activities across the entire democratic party spectrum (Jann and Veit 2015). The system implemented in Germany is notably more tolerant regarding civil servants' participation in party activities compared to many other democratic states (Jann and Veit 2021). The central idea behind establishing such a system was that civil servants who identify with and are dedicated to the

democratic system would be essential in solidifying the role of the civil service as the backbone of democracy.

The fact that the civil service in Germany towards the end of the Weimar Republic did not prove to be the backbone of democracy has a lot to do with the history of public administration in Germany. The civil servants of the German Empire were characterized by a mindset in which they saw themselves as loyal servants to the state and especially to the reigning Emperor and as a counterpart to political parties and trade unions (Strobel and Veit 2021). After the decline of the Empire in 1918/1919 and the founding of the Weimar Republic, the new democratic leaders tried to bind the conservative, and mostly monarchic and antidemocratic civil servants to the constitution (Caplan 1988; Gössel 2002, 96–97) but did not succeed in this endeavour. Old aversions to democracy remained and were further strengthened by the experiences of civil servants with the economically and politically unstable and crisis-ridden Weimar Republic (Föllmer 2001). Many civil servants accepted Hitler's *Machtergreifung* and its consequences without protest (Gössel 2002). According to the literature, this had three main reasons: first, many of the bureaucrats welcomed the new system because it fit in with their anti-democratic attitude. Second, with the principle of loyalty to the *state per se* and not to democratic principles and institutions, civil servants saw their duty in loyally serving the new leader of the state. Third, to save their own position in the system and secure their economic status, many civil servants accepted the policies of the new government (Rebentisch 1989, 143; Mommsen 1966; Strobel and Veit 2021).

Based on these experiences, the creation of a democratic mindset among civil servants was seen as an important factor when the Federal Republic of Germany was founded — and the proximity of civil servants to democratic parties was therefore viewed more positively than emphasizing the associated risks of politicization. This view has certainly changed over the decades and the whole issue is viewed more controversially today. What has remained, however, is a fundamental acceptance in the German society that civil servants should be allowed to engage in party political activities if this has no impact on the performance of their administrative duties and does not give them any privileges in office (i.e. in terms of promotion). Whether this would

be sufficient to protect liberal democracy in the long term if illiberal rulers were in power for a longer period is doubtful in view of the available research findings on this topic (Yesilkagit 2021). To make bureaucracy more resilient towards democratic backsliding (Bauer et al. 2021), it therefore remains an important task to further strengthen and institutionalize the responsibility of civil servants towards society and citizens, i.e. to further establish an understanding of civil servants as “primarily agents of the liberal constitution, rather than that of the government at the time” (Yesilkagit 2021). The legalistic administrative culture in Germany could prove to be supportive here, since reference to the constitution and laws is a deeply rooted professional standard in the country.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the question whether the ‘Golden Age’ of the civil service in Germany has come to an end due to change dynamics such as politicization and externalization, which have eroded the traditional role of the professional civil service as the prime policy adviser. The hypothesis is that this is not the case — the advisory role of the German ministerial bureaucracy remains significant. Moreover, their professional and meritocratic character has remained largely intact despite an increase in the politicization of top civil servants over the last decades. This politicization has been described precisely in this chapter, showing that it can also be understood as professionalization and a functional adaptation to changes in the political sphere.

In recent decades, the German administration has been challenged by numerous developments including crises and large societal transformations. So far, however, it has managed to remain fairly robust in the face of this pressure to change. This lack of adaptability and status quo orientation of the German administration has been criticized many times and causes problems in various areas. The backlog in the digitalization of public administration in Germany is only one example. At the same time, the high level of continuity in the German administration also has its benefits. One of the strengths of the German model is that professional standards are so deeply rooted in the administration that it cannot be assumed that illiberal forces will

simply undermine them in the short term. The central position of the ministerial bureaucracy in policymaking has also been preserved, allowing external stakeholders in Germany to primarily influence policymaking through civil servants in the ministries.

German history has taught us that anchoring democratic values in the civil service is essential. There is a need for future research on this topic. It is known that civil servants in Germany are more politically engaged than the average citizen. However, the extent to which they have internalized democratic values as a professional norm and the extent to which they are able to defend these values, even in the face of resistance, when they are violated, is a question that still needs to be clarified.

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7



From dominance to decline

**The waning influence of
Japanese civil service**

MASAO KIKUCHI

Introduction

JAPANESE CIVIL SERVICE has been characterized by its influential policy-making power over politicians, a highly centralized and authoritarian system with its historical origin, and an unchanged nature through a series of political and administrative reform efforts (Campbell 1989; Cearse 2002; Neary 2019). Certainly, this powerful and even transcendent image of Japanese bureaucrats contributed to the post-war rapid economic growth, and its connections with politics and business have been well documented and analyzed (Johnson 1982; Samuels 1987). The civil servants themselves have kept their central role in the policymaking process as a self-image, and their future prospects about their central role in the policymaking process were even bigger and brighter according to the survey on Bureaucrats' Attitudes and Perceptions in the 1970s (Muramatsu & Krauss 1984). Not only among bureaucrats, but also politicians and the general public thought that bureaucrats have the knowledge power about the policies in dealing with social issues. This golden age has been gradually changing from the mid-1970s. The precise onset of bureaucratic decline remains a subject of scholarly debate; however, there exists a consensus regarding the gradual erosion of bureaucratic influence and efficacy in Japan. It is evident among career bureaucrats about their declining self-image as a central actor in the policymaking process (Muramatsu 2004). The 1990s and 2000s in Japan saw many government reforms aimed at changing the way the government was managed, which had been believed to be dominated by elite bureaucrats in its policymaking process. After a series of reforms, the golden age of the national civil service is already gone. This decline is evidenced by the declining number of civil service exam applicants

among university graduates, and their eroding self-confidence (Kitamura 2022; National Personnel Authority 2022).

This chapter tries to illustrate and argue for the waning of the national civil service in Japan, which was once labeled as a “bureaucratic kingdom” with its supremacy (Gibney 1998). When was the golden age of the national civil service? And what factors contributed to making the national civil service enjoy a golden age? And if it has changed, when and why? Drawing from the Japanese experiences, this chapter tries to answer these broad questions in the following sections.

“Golden Age” of Japanese civil service from historical perspective

Prewar history of Japanese civil service

The Japanese political system has employed a parliamentary system of government based on the separation of powers since the formation of the modern government in the 1868 Meiji Restoration (Akizuki 2010; Shimizu 2019). As Japan was a “late modernizer,” its national goal was to catch up to the Western countries. Prior to the enactment of the Meiji Imperial Constitution, a national civil servant system based on a merit was introduced.

After the Meiji Restoration, the appointment of government officials began with the Satsuma and other clan factions freely appointing their close associates (Koh 1989; Spaulding 1967). However, in 1885, prior to the replacement of the Grand Council of State with the cabinet system after the promulgation of the Imperial Constitution, a government official system based on the German constitutional monarchy of the time was used. In this system, officials were positioned as “servants of the emperor,” and distinctions were made between imperial appointees depending on their status and distance from the emperor. At the same time, the policy of appointing officials by examination was announced. Based on this policy, in 1887, the appointment of officials other than imperial appointees (ministers, vice-ministers, bureau chiefs, etc., called as “*Chyokuninkan*”) was made by examination in principle, and the first open competitive examination was held the following year. The basic reason for the

shift from a free appointment to a merit-based system with examinations was that the then cabinet, headed by prime minister Hirobumi Ito, believed it necessary to fend off criticism of clan politics. It was also necessary to secure the absoluteness and superiority of the administration over the parliament by obtaining high-quality government officials in preparation for the opening of the Imperial Parliament in 1890 (Spaulding 1967).

After the formation of the modern nation state as a result of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, a strongly centralized first modern national government was established to integrate the past feudal and decentralized system. Most government officials in the Meiji period were recruited from the former warrior or samurai class that contributed to the persistence of the old social status that derived from rigid feudalistic hierarchy (Silberman 1993). This resulted in a strong sense of *kanson minpi* (reverence for public officials). However, the samurai class was the only intellectual class in Japan during the Meiji Restoration. The samurai class was originally formed as warriors for shogun (tycoon) and local lords. Before the Meiji period, there was a long reign of peace. After the Tokugawa shogunate integrated the Japanese area, there was again a long reign of peace for around 250 years. Under this peaceful reign, the samurai class, basically trained as warriors, became de facto “government officials” and their capacity to control and manage each feudal state was acknowledged.

In addition to the historical background of the Japanese bureaucracy, the traditional socio-cultural influence of Confucian culture has also contributed to the privileged status of the Japanese bureaucratic system. East Asian countries share Confucian culture as an underlying basic belief and value in society (Hofstede & Bond 1988; Frederickson 2002; Cheung 2012). Both explicitly and implicitly, Confucian culture is embedded in governmental organizations as a fundamental organizational culture in Japan. Group orientation and hierarchical norms in Confucian thought closely matched the values and formation of traditional bureaucracy when Japan encountered modernization in the late 19th century (Painter 2010). This affinity of values between Confucian thought and traditional bureaucracy reinforced each other, forming a strong and rigid “bureaucratic kingdom” in Japan (Jun & Muto 1995).

Confucian tradition recognizes a sense of authority formed by dominant power, represented in the hierarchy between ruler and people. As societal stability is based on unequal relationships between individuals, such as ruler/subject and elder/younger, both the formal and informal structures of authority and power were established in the political framework and social ethos. In other words, “power distance” is the degree to which less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept and expect an unequal distribution of power (Hofstede & Bond 1988). According to Nakane (1970), the structure of Japanese society is based on social relations with “the vertical principle.” This hierarchical and stratified social order, rooted in cultural tradition, is reinforced by the values of traditional bureaucracy.

Within a hierarchy, leaders or rulers have a moral obligation to ensure peace, prosperity, and justice so that the people will be happy and able to live fulfilling lives (Frederickson 2002). The people also have a moral obligation to support their leaders, provided those leaders meet their moral obligations. Unlike the social “contract” theory, which forms the basis of Western democracy, reciprocity is central to Confucian governance. High moral commitment is required from elite rulers, as social relations are based on moral obligations. Their source of power is not constitutional or legal, nor charismatic, but lies in the high moral obligations of each bureaucrat. This places more importance on good officials rather than laws or institutions as primary instruments of governance.

If moral obligation is an integral part of the desired capacity of government officials, how can it be developed? It is through education. Influenced by Confucian thought, education is not regarded as a means to acquire specific technical knowledge. The purpose of education is not about having, but about being — developing one’s humanity. With understanding and knowledge, a person will be moral and behave properly. In Britain, France, and Germany, traditions of selecting top bureaucrats from the best students in the best universities or highly selective special colleges for prospective government leaders continue in practice. In the Japanese context, the University of Tokyo, established as an imperial university to train future bureaucrats under imperial rule, has long been regarded as the “best” school for producing “good officials.”

Postwar history of Japanese civil service

With the adoption of Japan's new constitution in 1946, a parliamentary cabinet system similar to that of the UK, with limited appointive positions, was introduced. This new constitution significantly altered the status of civil servants, transforming them from "officials of the Emperor" to "servants of the people as a whole." Under the newly enacted National Public Service Act, the professional civil service system, based on merit through examinations and other demonstrations of ability, was maintained.

From 1945 to 1952, Japan was occupied by the Allied Powers, who aimed to demilitarize and democratize the country's political structure and public policy processes. The imperial army and navy were disbanded, war industries were dismantled, and the *zaibatsu*, large Japanese business conglomerates, were converted into civilian industries. Most members of the imperial parliament and wartime ministers were purged from the government, and the Allied forces ruled indirectly. To fully liberalize the old Japanese regime, the Allied forces retained the bureaucracy, using it as their agent of reform. This allowed the old system to persist through the postwar democratization and liberalization process. Since then, the bureaucracy has dominated the policy process with its policymaking capabilities (Tsuji 1984). In general, the bureaucracy maintained significant influence over the national policymaking process in the early postwar era, carrying forward the adverse legacy of the prewar imperial period in the Japanese public policy structure (Gibney 1998; Kikuchi 2010).

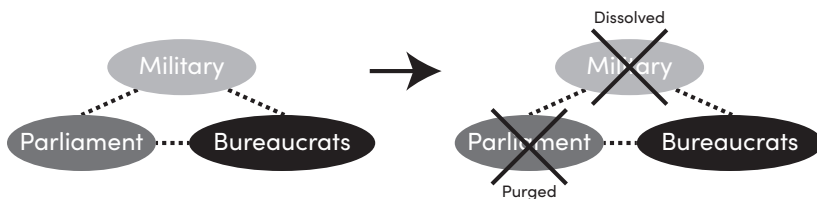


Figure 7.1
World War II in Japan

Figure 7.1: *Dynamics of Policy-Making Power Balance Before and After.*

Source: Kikuchi (2010)

The fact that among the influential policy-making groups in the old regime, only the bureaucracy “survived” the purge by the Allied forces demonstrates how much the Japanese policy-making process retained elements of the old and traditional regime. Although Japan’s postwar constitution prescribed in Article 15 that “All public officials are servants of the whole community and not of any group thereof,” the democratization and liberalization processes were not fully realized due to the substantial policymaking capacities of the bureaucracy (Tsuji 1984). In general, the bureaucracy retained influential power in the national policymaking process during the postwar era. During the era of rapid economic growth, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) held tremendous sway over the business community through its industry policies (Johnson 1982). Not only in the policymaking process, but the influence of the bureaucracy was also exercised in administrative implementation by issuing “administrative guidance,” which was beyond legislative control from the parliament.

In addition to bureaucratic control in implementation, the bureaucracy actually drafts legislative bills on behalf of the cabinet. As drafting legislative bills requires specialized legal knowledge and skills, cabinet-initiated policies are often transformed and drafted by the bureaucracy, allowing room for manipulation. The Cabinet Legislative Bureau, which directly assists the Cabinet on legislative matters and examines legislative bills and other government orders, also holds significant influence in policymaking, contributing to the policy-making process being limited to an inner community. As a result, most legislative bills

proposed to the floor are cabinet-initiated bills, and the legislative proposal process is virtually dominated by the bureaucracy, hence the policy and legislative processes are dominated by the bureaucracy.

Another compelling reason the policy process is dominated by the inner circle is the application of the *primus inter pares* principle to the Prime Minister's office and the cabinet. In prewar days, the Prime Minister's position was that of an assistant to the Emperor, and because the Prime Minister was no more than first among equals, he could not even discharge one of his cabinet ministers. Resignation of one minister meant resignation of the entire cabinet. After the new constitution, although this principle was not endorsed by any constitutional or legal concept and the Prime Minister could dismiss ministers, this principle was informally institutionalized in the cabinet. The Prime Minister could not exercise top-down executive leadership over his cabinet in the policymaking process. This principle was later weakened in the central government reform of 2001.

As previously pointed out, most members of the Japanese parliament were expelled by the Allied forces after Japan's surrender in World War II. Consequently, the bureaucracy became the only remaining policy-making entity capable of implementing democratizing and liberalizing reforms, which gave it significant influence over policymaking through budget control and other means. After Japan regained its independence with the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1952, the previously purged politicians were granted amnesty, and some began to reoccupy seats in parliament.

In 1955, conservative politicians founded the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), while socialists who had been split into conservative and liberal factions united to establish the Japan Socialist Party (JSP). Under this so-called "1955 regime," the LDP and JSP served as the ruling and opposition parties, respectively. This *de facto* two-party system persisted during the Cold War era, reflecting the bipolar ideology seen in global politics. The stability afforded by this arrangement allowed the bureaucracy to oversee the rapid economic growth of the postwar period. Although the bureaucracy-led economic growth policies flourished, members of parliament began to gain policy expertise in specific areas (e.g., transportation infrastructure planning) and prioritized industrial policies (Curtis 1999). Starting in the 1960s, members of par-

liament who worked on behalf of special interests and benefited from their support became known as “*zoku*” (i.e., a political clan based on reciprocal political and economic interests) politicians and began to exert influence over the national policy-making process (Fukui 1970).

Zoku politicians with shared interests and benefits formed small factions representing business sectors allied with government ministries. The zoku politicians, the associated business organizations, and government ministries became interlinked. The zoku politicians benefited from the financial and electoral support of the business sector and received favorable treatment from ministries that supported their policy initiatives. The business sector, in turn, gained strong influence over government ministries and policies through the zoku politicians.

Given the influence of zoku politics on the national policy-making process, Fukui (1970) and Muramatsu & Klauss (1984) argued that the Japanese public policy process was not as centralized by the bureaucracy but rather, was more pluralized and decentralized. Zoku politicians in the ruling party amassed considerable influence over policymaking, and local governments mobilized locally elected members of parliament to exert political power, bypassing the administrative hierarchy within the central government. Thus, elected members of parliament and local governments acquired significant influence over both agenda-setting and policy implementation (Pempel 1990). Nonetheless, an examination of the backgrounds of LDP members of parliament who are zoku politicians reveals that, after local politicians such as governors, mayors, and local government assembly members, former national bureaucrats were a significant source of their origin. The fact that retired bureaucrats become politicians and influence the policy-making process further demonstrates the continued significant role of bureaucrats’ power including retired ones in the policy-making process.

From patriotic to coordinating, and to clerical bureaucrat: evolving self-image and waning influences

For many years, the Japanese civil service has been characterized by its influential policy-making power (Campbell 1989; Cearse 2002; Painter 2010). This powerful and even transcendent image of Japanese

bureaucrats derives with its historical origins (Shimizu 2019; Silberman 1993). Especially in prewar period, together with its Confucian ethos, merit based “modern” civil service system and new educational institutions interacted to create a “bureaucratic kingdom”. When explaining the role of bureaucrats in Japanese society and politics, scholars often utilize the three archetypes of bureaucrats — patriotic bureaucrat, coordinating bureaucrat, and clerical bureaucrat — along with their historical evolution. These archetypes provide a nuanced understanding of the bureaucratic system and its development over time, reflecting the changing political and social landscapes of Japan (Mabuchi 2009).

The patriotic bureaucrat is characterized by a profound commitment to national interests and values, often seeing its role as serving the country above all else. These bureaucrats are typically driven by a sense of duty to safeguard and promote national priorities, and they play a crucial role in aligning governmental policies with the broader goals of national development and public service. This archetype emerged prominently during the Meiji Restoration (1868), when the newly established government sought to modernize and strengthen Japan by adopting Western institutions and practices. The patriotic bureaucrat was instrumental in driving the country’s rapid modernization and industrialization during this period. This patriotic bureaucrat character can be seen even in the post-war period as the Allied forces retained the bureaucracy, and it allowed the old system to persist through the postwar democratization and liberalization process until around the 1960s and 70s.

The coordinating bureaucrat focuses on balancing and harmonizing diverse interests within the policy-making process. These bureaucrats excel in negotiation and mediation, ensuring that policies are implemented effectively and that conflicting interests are reconciled. Their ability to facilitate consensus and collaboration among various stakeholders including Zoku politicians, and business is essential for achieving effective governance. This archetype became particularly significant during the 1970s, as they are involved in political activities, such as engaging in political give-and-take with Zoku politicians. The coordinating bureaucrat played a vital role in managing these com-

plexities and maintaining stability within the government and society when Japan faced increasing social and political complexities.

The last type is the clerical bureaucrat, and it emphasizes administrative efficiency and procedural adherence. These bureaucrats are primarily concerned with the routine tasks and procedural aspects of governance, such as managing records, ensuring compliance with regulations, and maintaining the day-to-day operations of government functions. The clerical bureaucrat, in contrast to the previous two types of bureaucrats, defines its role in a much more restrictive and limited manner. Unlike the patriotic and coordinating bureaucrats, who often engage in broader policy-making and political activities, the clerical bureaucrats focus primarily on administrative efficiency and procedural adherence, confining themselves to routine tasks and the procedural aspects of governance. The rise in the number of clerical bureaucrats began around the 1990s, a period characterized by significant reforms such as government ministries streamlining, decentralization, and reforms aimed at reducing bureaucratic dominance in politics.

Alongside the transformations in the three bureaucratic archetypes, there has been a noticeable evolution in the self-image of bureaucrats themselves. As the roles of patriotic bureaucrats, coordinating bureaucrats, and clerical bureaucrats have shifted over time, reflecting broader political and social changes, so too has the way bureaucrats perceive and define their own roles within the broader political and administrative system. This evolution in self-image mirrors the shifting expectations and demands placed on the bureaucracy, illustrating how internal and external pressures have influenced how bureaucrats view their responsibilities, identity, and function within the governance structure.

Muramatsu (2004) conducted a series of interview surveys with high-ranking national civil servants (directors or higher-level) in the 1970s, 1980s, and 2000s, aiming to capture the power dynamics in the policy-making process and its transformations. These surveys demonstrate their awareness of the shifting dynamics within the bureaucracy and the broader political landscape. The findings revealed that senior civil servants, who once enjoyed discretionary and influential power, had already anticipated losing influence in the policy process. The sur-

vey asked the question “Which actor has the most influential power in making national policies”. In the 1970s, the political party was already regarded as the most influential actor among high ranked national civil servants. They believed that they themselves are the second important actor in the policy process. In the 1986 survey, the trend is basically the same but the political party’s influence ranked higher than in the 1970s survey. In the 2000s survey, which was conducted under the Koizumi administration which actively promoted the privatization reforms of state-owned enterprises, they thought their influential power in the policy making process had largely decreased. Instead, the influence of both the political party and others (such as political appointees or business organizations) largely increased.

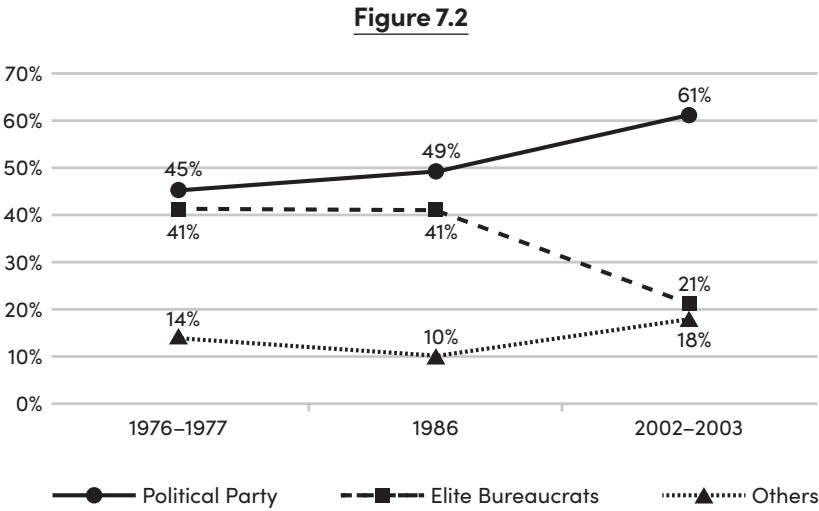


Figure 7.2: *Perception of High-Ranking Bureaucrats as the Most Influential Actors in the National Policy Making Process.*

Source: Muramatsu (2004)

Note 1: Sample Size: N=251 (1976-77); N=252 (1986); N=290 (2002-2003)

Note 2: Total is not equal to 100% due to round off.

Note 3: The percentage of single-answer responses to the question “Which of the following do you think has the most influence in determining national policy in Japan?”

The surveys also explored the future prospects of the power and influence of civil servants in the policy-making process. In the 1970s sur-

vey, half of the respondents believed their power would remain unchanged, while 30% anticipated an increase in their power in the near future. Overall, during the 1970s, senior national civil servants perceived their power and influence as relatively stable, given the rigid power balance among political parties, bureaucrats, and other stakeholders.

However, the basic direction of their future prospects underwent a radical shift in the 1980s survey. At that time, 48% of the respondents expected a decrease in their power, while 41% believed it would remain the same. This marked a significant departure from the “upward” trend observed in the 1970s, reflecting a “downward” trend in their expectations regarding future power and influence. This trend persisted and became even more pronounced in the 2000s survey, where over 70% of respondents anticipated a further decrease in their power and influence, and only 6% expected an increase. The 1990s and 2000s in Japan saw many government reforms aimed at changing the way the government was managed, which had been believed to be dominated by elite bureaucrats in its policymaking process. It is evident that, following these reforms, the golden age of the national civil service — at least from the perspective of the bureaucrats — has significantly waned.

Figure 7.3

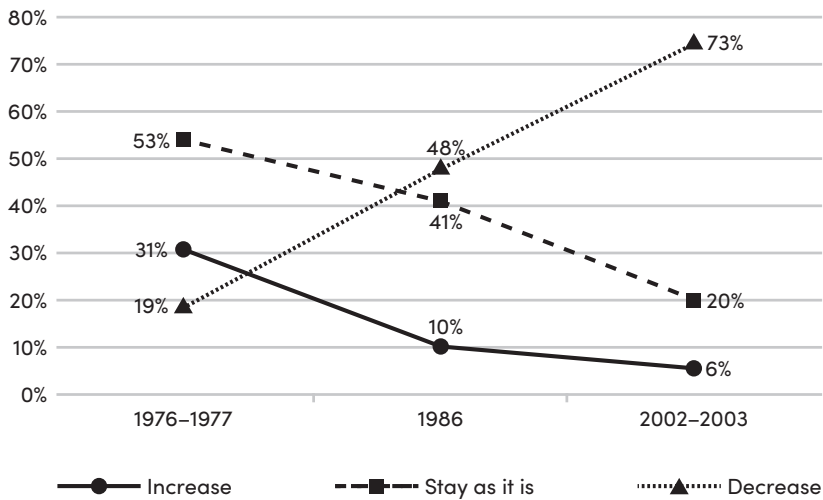


Figure 7.3: *Perception of High-Ranking Bureaucrats on Future Prospects of Power and Influence of National Civil Servant in Policy Making Process.*

Source: Muramatsu (2004)

Note 1: Sample Size: N=251 (1976-77); N=252 (1986); N=290 (2002-2003)

Note 2: Total is not equal to 100% due to round off.

These perceptions and their changes are based on surveys of senior civil servants in the national government in the 1970s, 1980s, and 2000s. More recently, Kitamura and others conducted a bureaucrat perception survey in 2019 (Kitamura 2022). Unlike the previous three surveys, the 2019 survey was conducted online, targeting deputy directors or higher-level senior civil servants in six ministries. The valid sample size was 203, with an average sample age of 48.13 years as of April 1, 2019. In this survey, when respondents were asked, “Is the prestige of bureaucrats declining within society?” 93% responded “strongly agree” or “agree”, while only 7% said “disagree”. Similarly, when asked, “Do senior executives have a clear vision for the future of the organization (ministry/department)?” 64.5% responded “disagree” or “strongly disagree”, while 35.5% expressed “agree” or “strongly agree”. The results indicate that bureaucrats themselves are aware of the decline in their social status and the decreasing expecta-

tions in their roles. Furthermore, many respondents noted that the top management of the government and ministries lacks a clear vision for the future, reflecting a sense of stagnation and frustration within the bureaucracy.

Reforms on civil service and losing competitive edge

What factors have contributed to the shift in the self-image of Japanese civil servants, who had long maintained influence on the policy-making process, and the resulting recent sharp decline in applicants for civil service exams? First, the political changes following the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP)'s first loss of power in 1993 since its formation in 1955, which led to transformations in the policymaking process and subsequent government reforms to change the way to govern the nation and the relationship between politics and bureaucracy. Second, the high-profile money-related corruption scandals involving senior bureaucrats around the same time significantly undermined public trust in the bureaucrats, who were previously believed to uphold not only high policy-making capabilities, but also a far greater degree of integrity and morality than politicians. Lastly, the prolonged economic downturns known as the "Lost Decades" or "Lost 30 Years," from the late 1990s marked by various policy failures, particularly in economic policy, have contributed to growing public skepticism about the effectiveness of bureaucrat-led policies. These are three major factors behind the decline in self-confidence and the resulting decrease in the number of applicants for public service positions, which have made them less popular career options among competent new graduates from the top universities.

Strangely enough, although many government reform efforts were pursued and some reform proposals were partially achieved, such as the privatization of government-owned enterprises in the 1980s, civil service system reform had not long been a main agenda item in government reform until the late 1990s. This was partly due to the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) ruling the parliament for almost 40 years after re-independence, and strategically interacting with bureaucrats (Kato 1994). They called for civil service reform in favor of their constituents, but sometimes parliament members even acted as guardians of the ministries. In return, the "coordinating bureaucrat" were proactively

involved with the political give-and-take through negotiations and mediations among various stakeholders. Nonetheless, this expected everlasting “honeymoon period” was disrupted by political turbulence in the mid-1990s.

Japan in the 1990s experienced an unprecedented economic downturn for the first time in the postwar growth era. Its economy stagnated for more than a decade, and the government did not provide sufficient economic measures. After once reaching the apex labeled as “Japan as No. 1” (Vogel 1979), the Japanese economy entered a prolonged slump following the bursting of the bubble economy. Both the bureaucracy-dominated policy process and vested-interest politics by Zoku politicians were regarded as the root causes of the insufficient policy measures and the drawbacks of these features in the Japanese public policy process.

In addition to the deteriorating economic situation, political turbulence emerged in the mid-1990s. The LDP lost its ruling party position in the general election in 1993 for the first time since the “1955 regime” was formed. These instances caused much of the Japanese public to doubt the validity and competence of the current policy-making process. Additionally, high-ranking officials involved in scandals made headlines, accelerating public doubt. Two retired administrative vice ministers (from the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Ministry of Transportation), who once held the highest positions in the career civil service, were arrested for alleged corruption in the late 1990s. These instances created the reform agenda for the civil service and public policy process in the late 1990s.

A series of high-ranking officials involved in corruption scandals made headlines on television, leading the public to suspect that these cases were just a small part of seemingly endless corruption at the heart of the nation’s professional elite bureaucracy. Responding to public outcry, the National Public Service Ethics Law (the Ethics Law) was drafted to prevent civil servants from abusing their power. The proposal was unanimously approved by both the lower and upper houses of parliament in 1999. This law aimed to ensure public trust in public service by deterring activities that create suspicion or distrust regarding the fairness of duty performance, through the introduction of measures to uphold ethics among national public service officials.

The law mandates the establishment of a National Public Service Ethics Board within the National Personnel Authority. This board is responsible for conducting research and studies concerning the retention of ethics in national public services, developing standards for disciplinary actions against employees violating the law, and submitting opinions concerning the establishment or revision of the National Public Service Officials Ethics Code to the Cabinet.

For many years, it was believed that the Japanese bureaucracy maintained a high moral obligation, which formed the foundation of its influential power over the policymaking process. However, this image deteriorated due to a series of scandals involving high-ranking officials in the 1990s and continuous media coverage. As a result, the public no longer regards bureaucrats as high moral elites. This skepticism among the general populace regarding the morality of elite national bureaucrats is well demonstrated in the results of a special public opinion poll on national civil service system reform conducted in 2009. The poll, conducted by the Cabinet Office with a sample size of 1,935 respondents, asked about the desired attributes of national civil servants. The general public believed that moral integrity and responsibility were the most necessary attributes for national civil servants, surpassing professionalism and other competencies.

Another reform that is considered to have influenced the ethos and motivation of national civil servants, apart from the National Public Service Ethics Law, is the establishment of the Cabinet Personnel Bureau in 2014. This was intended to weaken bureaucratic control by strengthening executive oversight over the personnel affairs of senior public officials. Before the creation of the bureau, national civil servant management was more decentralized. The National Personnel Authority, which is an independent national agency, was in charge of recruitment, equity, and investigative issues. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications controlled the total number of national civil servants, organizational reviews of each ministry/agency, and the retirement process. To further strengthen centralized political control and management of senior executive service, the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs was established in 2014, which formally introduced institutionalized senior executive service management. With the establishment of Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs in 2014, which

oversees the appointment of about 600 elite bureaucrats at ministries and agencies for the central government in a united manner through the strategic appointment of senior executive service members, the cabinet fully influences and controls the whole process of senior executive service management.

Considering the aforementioned reforms, along with the impact of the widespread adoption of remote work which allows for a more flexible working style, due to COVID-19 (from which many public servants were excluded), the popularity of civil service careers among students has declined. Since the application categories were changed in 2012, allowing for a valid comparison from that year onward, the number of applicants for national civil service positions has been decreasing. The number of applicants for the 2024 exams continues to set record lows. In the year 2024 exam, the number of applicants for the Comprehensive Service (formerly Class One), which is the elite national civil servant category was 13,599, which set the record low, and it decreased by approximately 40% since 2012. In 2022, the national personnel authority referred to the decline of applicants for the national civil service exam in its white paper report, and analyzed that despite that fact that the population of 22-year-old Japanese between 2012 and 2020 has not been changed dramatically (1.2 million in 2012 and 1.19 million in 2020), the number of applicants for the Comprehensive Service for elite professionals (formerly Class One) decreased 20.6% during the same period, while the number of applicant for the General Service for the University Graduate level (formerly Class Two) decreased more, 28.1% within the same period. This current reduction in the number of applicants for the national civil service exam is much bigger than the youth population decline in Japan (National Personnel Authority 2022).

Not only has the popularity of civil service careers among students declined, but there has also been an increase in public servant turnover. The turnover rate for employees in Comprehensive Service for elite professionals (formerly Class One) with less than five years of service increased by 4.9% from 5.1% for the recruits in the fiscal year 2013, to 10.0% for the recruits in the fiscal year 2016 (National Personnel Authority 2022). Furthermore, among successful candidates who pass the exam for the Comprehensive Service for elite profes-

nals category in 2024, the number and percentage of those from the University of Tokyo have reached record lows. Specifically, the proportion of successful candidates with a University of Tokyo background has fallen below 10%. The decline in the popularity of civil service careers among students at the University of Tokyo, an institution originally established to train future bureaucrats, reflects a broader shift in societal values. Once regarded as the pinnacle of elite achievement and a prestigious career path, the bureaucratic profession now symbolizes the waning influence and appeal of a career that was previously held in high esteem. This shift highlights the changing perceptions of the public service and the evolving career aspirations of top students in Japan.

Conclusion

The Japanese civil service has been historically marked by its significant policy-making authority over politicians, a centralized and authoritarian system with deep historical and cultural roots, and a consistent nature despite various political and administrative reforms (Painter 2010). This influential role of Japanese bureaucrats played a crucial part in Japan's rapid post-war economic development (Johnson 1982). For a long time, civil servants saw themselves as key players in the policymaking process as patriotic bureaucrats, and surveys from the 1970s indicated a promising outlook for their central role (Muramatsu & Krauss 1984). With the rise and increasing influence of Zoku politicians, who represent business interest sectors, in national policy-making process, the privileged position of bureaucrats in the policy-making process is threatened. However, not only do bureaucrats continue to play an active role in coordinating various stakeholders interests as coordinating bureaucrats, but many Zoku politicians also have former bureaucratic careers. Even with the rise of Zoku politicians, central bureaucrats have kept a certain influence over the national policy making process.

This era of bureaucratic dominance began to shift gradually from around the mid-1970s, and the series of reforms in 1990s and 2000s marked a significant turning point in the waning of bureaucratic influence. Several factors have contributed to the decline in self-con-

fidence within the Japanese civil service and the sharp drop in applicants for public service positions within this period. First, political changes following the Liberal Democratic Party's loss of power in 1993 led to transformations in policymaking and government reforms, altering the relationship between politics and bureaucracy. Second, corruption scandals involving senior bureaucrats around the same time significantly eroded public trust in their integrity. Lastly, the prolonged economic downturns, known as the "Lost Decades," increased public skepticism about the effectiveness of bureaucrat-led policies, making civil service less attractive to top university graduates. In response to the growing need for bureaucratic reform Central government reforms, the creation of the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs, and others, which aimed at changing the way the government was managed, have led to the end of the civil service's golden age. This shift is reflected in the diminishing self-perception of career bureaucrats regarding their central role in policy-making, from patriotic to coordinating, and to a clerical one (Muramatsu 2004). This decline is evident in the decreasing number of civil service exam applicants among university graduates and the erosion of their self-confidence (Kitamura 2022; National Personnel Authority 2022). This marks a significant change in the role of bureaucrats in Japanese policymaking and highlights a broader transformation in governance dynamics in Japan.

Despite the observed decline in the influence of Japanese bureaucrats, there remains a strong and persistent viewpoint among experts that the bureaucratic influence continues to be upheld. These experts argue that, despite the reforms and changes in the policy-making process, bureaucrats still retain a significant degree of power and influence within the system (Cheung 2012; Drucker 1998; Jun & Muto 1995; Neary 2019). Cheung (2012) argued that whereas public sector reforms in the West were based on the perception that government was the 'problem' and seeking to install market supremacy, government in East Asia is arguably still held as the solution to problems, where people expect a competent and selfless bureaucracy to help drive social progress and economic prosperity. It is true that comparatively speaking, east Asian countries including Japan have been less influenced by New Public Management (NPM) compared to other countries, and its governance based on the existing bureaucratic system has largely been maintained

(Agata et al. 2024). Nonetheless, the series of reforms has made the waning of the bureaucratic system increasingly apparent, and the ability to maintain this system is uncertain due to a decade-long decline in the number of applicants in national civil service exams. In contrast to the meritocracy crisis occurring in countries like the United States, efforts are being made to redefine the state and administration through the Neo-Weberian State approach (Bauer et al. 2021; Bouckaert 2023; Kattel et al. 2022). The waning of Japan's civil service has only just begun, and how and for how long this decline will continue depends on how Japan reconstructs its governance capabilities.

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8



The waning of national public service in South Korea

KEUN NAMKOONG

THIS CHAPTER PROVIDES A HISTORICAL overview of South Korea's national public service, focusing on public officials' roles in national governance. The study begins with an examination of the Joseon Dynasty's meritocratic tradition, which served as the foundation for South Korea's public service system. It then describes national public service after the Republic of Korea's founding in 1948. Next, it examines the establishment of meritocracy during Park Chung-hee's administration in the 1960s, as well as several factors that shaped the influence of the national public service on the country's development during the 1970s and '80s. Following an examination of the impact of the democratic transition in 1987, the NPM reform, and the relocation of the central government complex on the waning of national public service since the mid-1990s, the study ends with a brief summary and conclusion.

I. The Joseon Dynasty's Confucian meritocracy tradition

The Confucian meritocracy tradition of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) served as the foundation for South Korea's modern public service system. The Joseon Dynasty selected officials through a merit-based, open competitive examination comparable to current standards of meritocracy (Cha 2021, 2). The civil service entrance test in East Asia started in ancient China in 587. In Korea, the Goryeo dynasty introduced it in 958. Korea has commonly used written tests for entry since then (Kim, 2010).

The civil service examination (Munkwa) was critical in Joseon's selection of the majority of public officials (Lee 2002). It assessed a candidate's intellectual competence and diligence in learning and understanding Confucian texts, including precedents, law, policy, and diplomacy (Cha 2021, 9). In 1894, the Joseon Dynasty abolished the civil service test, which had been in use for 503 years, beginning in 1392. There were 748 exams administered, with 14,600 candidates passing. Most Joseon officials passed the tests and the hiring and promotion to higher posts prioritized those with high marks. There was a clear and

linear relationship between a higher rank on the entrance examination, which is frequently considered a proxy for competence, and a higher possibility of promotion to senior posts (Hejtmanek 2013; Lee and Park 2023). Joseon designed the civil service test system to select and promote outstanding individuals, not just to validate existing social status.

Jeong Do-jeon, a Confucian scholar who designed the Joseon bureaucracy, made the case for a system of governance in which the king and bureaucrats jointly exercised power (Park 2017, 149–50). The relationship between the king and bureaucrats was defined by the notion of complementarity rather than the king's unilateral dominance. In the early Joseon Dynasty, bureaucrats were a group of academics who gained recognition for their abilities through competitive tests. Thus, the bureaucrats in the Joseon Dynasty differed significantly from Max Weber's idea of patrimonial bureaucracy, in which officials were chosen based on their loyalty or personal connection to the ruler. They were highly trusted by the people of the time. As a result, public officials of the Joseon Dynasty held a high social status.

But the civil service examination system lost its fairness and objectivity throughout the latter Joseon period (Kim 2002, 627–32). During that period, public officials engaged in heated disputes mostly centered around the ceremonial aspects of interpreting Confucian classical texts rather than addressing the actual needs of the general population or topics pertaining to national defense. Officials fought each other for their own factions rather than for the people. As a result, public trust in the government and bureaucracy declined, which paved the way for Japan to colonize Joseon in 1910.

II. Establishing the Korean civil service system (1948–61)

After Japan surrendered in World War II in 1945, South Korea was ruled by the United States military administration for three years. Following the foundation of the Republic of Korea in 1948, the Rhee Syngman administration established the Korean civil service system by passing the National Civil Service Act in 1949. The Act articulated the essential principles of public service, focusing on the merit system (Kim 2006, 8). The Act specified civil servant qualifications, examinations, appointments, a rank-in-person system, and other conditions.

At the time, there were five ranks, with A and B subdivisions in ranks three and four, respectively. Rank one was the highest level, while rank five was the lowest. The government appointed civil servants through two distinct processes: open competitive examinations and special appointments. There were two types of open competitive examinations: the higher-level civil service examination for entry into rank 3B and the ordinary civil service test for rank 4B. The higher-level civil service test was similar to the Joseon Dynasty's civil service exam, and success resulted in high social status and privileges. Thus, passing the civil service test was tough. Between 1949 and 1962, 19,081 candidates took the higher civil service test, with 375 passing, for an average of around 29 successful applicants every year (Bark 1969, 441). Only 1.9% of applicants were successful, indicating a high level of competitiveness.

However, the number of appointees through the open competitive examinations was relatively low, while the great majority was appointed through special appointments that received little scrutiny. Ranks 2 through 5 frequently made special appointments, facilitating a *de facto* patronage or spoils system. Only 3.56%, or 265 among the 7,440 civil servants who entered the public service between 1949 and 1960, were picked based on their exam scores, while the rest, 96.44% (7,175), were chosen by special appointment (Bark, 1969: 442). Rank 5 had the highest number of new hires, with no civil service tests and relying solely on special appointments.

Political appointments were common at that time. In the early years, individuals who had participated in the independence movement or received their education in Europe or the United States filled certain higher-level positions. However, the ruling Liberal Party politicized the civil service and engaged in cronyism in personnel management to solidify the regime's basis (Bark 1961). When the ruling Liberal Party's popularity and public confidence plummeted during the 1956 presidential election, leading to the election of opposition party nominee Chang Myon as vice president, the spoils system became increasingly prominent. Political influences affected personnel management choices such as filling vacancies, transfers, and promotions (Bark 1961; Namkoong 2007). Occasionally, the Rhee government unjustly fired disobedient civil servants from their jobs.

A student revolution toppled the Liberal Party government on April 19, 1960. This led to the creation of the Chang Myon government (1960–61) on August 23, 1960. The Chang government raised the number of public officials through competitive examinations and revised the National Public Service Act to include an open competitive examination for recruiting rank 5 civil servants. However, due to the ongoing political protests and upheaval, the administration was unable to maintain political stability (Kim 1982, 60). Furthermore, in personnel administration, the spoils system continued to exist in an unofficial manner.

III. Meritocracy and the growth of bureaucratic power (1961–1990)

The 1960s saw the birth of South Korea's Weberian meritocracy. In 1961, General Park Chung-hee's junta took control. The military's justification for the coup was 'escape from famine' and 'economic progress', given that the country's per capita GDP was just US \$81 at the time. To overcome its poor political legitimacy, Park's administration pursued a developmental state approach that focused on industrialization and economic development. A developmental state is one that prioritizes economic growth and implements the required governmental measures to achieve that goal (Johnson 1982; Amsden 1989). To be effective, a developmental state must possess certain features. In order to formulate and achieve development goals, it must establish a meritocratic bureaucracy and staff it with competent personnel. Furthermore, the bureaucracy and bureaucrats may operate autonomously, free of external influence.

1. Restructuring the bureaucracy

At the outset, Park Chung-hee's administration aimed to act as a 'market builder' by encouraging investment and targeting strategic industries as outlined in the government's plan of development (Amsden 1989). After assuming control, the military implemented a significant reorganization of the bureaucracy and the mechanism for pursuing economic development (Cho 1968; Cheng, Haggard, and Kang 1998). Following the coup in 1961, the military administration quickly es-

established the Economic Planning Board (EPB) as the lead ministry responsible for formulating and executing national economic development plans.

The EPB played a crucial role in the development era by overseeing economic development planning, managing foreign investments, allocating budgets, and handling statistics that pertain to society as a whole. The EPB Minister served concurrently as the Vice Prime Minister, with the goal of making economic growth the main priority in all government endeavours. To facilitate government-led national development, the executive branch undertook efforts to diversify its bureaucratic structure in the early 1960s. Since the 1960s, the number of civil servants, including local government officials, in Korea's executive branch has risen from 249,211 in 1962 to 412,852 in 1970, a 65.7% increase in eight years. The number rose to 589,020 in 1980 and 804,244 in 1990.

2. Transforming patronage system into meritocracy

Park Chung-hee's government aimed to reform the state bureaucracy into something entirely different from the patronage system of the Rhee administration. In 1963, a comprehensive revision of the National Civil Service Act established a meritocracy-based personnel system. These included centralizing recruitment and selection, improving tests, implementing a performance rating system, adopting a new training system, and improving pay administration (Bark 1969; Cheng, Haggard, and Kang 1998). The updated National Civil Service Act included a modified version of the rank system, with nine levels instead of five. A nine-grade system, with grade 1 as the highest and grade 9 as the lowest, replaced the nine-rank system in 1981.

Beginning in the 1960s, the South Korean public service's management cadre underwent a significant shift from amateur administrators to career bureaucrats. The military administration regarded bureaucrats, particularly those at the upper level of the career ladder, as incompetent and corrupt in dealing with civilian counterparts. In reaction, the military administration dismissed 33,000 civil personnel in July 1961, or roughly 13% of the total civil service at the time (Cho 1968, 224)¹. As a result, the majority of middle-level managers in the central government were replaced with university graduates under the

age of 40, persons who had studied abroad, and former military officers receiving education in management skills (Lee 1967, 17–18; Hwang 1970). Universities, notably Seoul National University, created graduate schools of public administration, and government ministries set up training institutions to provide managerial and technical training to public personnel.

Since the 1960s, the primary path to becoming a public servant has been to pass an open competitive test. The number of government workers recruited through the open test has grown considerably. For example, in 1977, there were 12,616 new recruits to the central government civil service, with 8,791 (69.7%) coming from open competitive examinations and 3,825 (30.3%) from special appointments². In the 1960s, there were few possibilities for young people to obtain jobs in the private sector; therefore, civil service examinations at all levels were very competitive³. Tens of thousands of graduates from top universities have aimed to pass the higher civil service test in grade 5. Between 1963 and 1980, 95,752 applicants took the higher civil service test, and 2,078 passed (115 per year on average), yielding a 2.2% pass rate. From 1981 to 1990, there was stiffer rivalry, with a pass rate of only 0.9%. In 1986, the competition ratio was the highest, at 164:1. During the 1980s, 44.2% of those who passed the higher civil service test earned a master's degree or enrolled in graduate school⁴. In this context, Evans (1998, 71) stated, "The civil service has had its pick among the 'best and the brightest' and those who pass the exam enjoy tremendous prestige."

The government has offered chances for public officials to receive training at domestic and international institutions, as well as scholarships for outstanding civil servants to pursue master's or doctoral degrees at foreign universities. For example, in October 1994, 73 (46.8 percent) of the 156 senior public officers at grade 4 and above in the EPB had master's or doctorate degrees from US universities (KED 1994, 21).

Korean public servants' salaries and severance compensation levels were lower than those in the private sector. According to a government survey⁵, civil servants earned around 87.0% of private sector employees' compensation in 1999. Government employees, on the other hand, work for a longer period than their private-sector counterparts

since they have a set retirement age. Research comparing the job satisfaction of government and private sector employees using the Korean Labor and Income Panel Study Data from 1998 to 2001 discovered that government employees were substantially happier with job stability than private sector employees (Jung and Kim 2003). They also receive supplementary benefits, such as the civil service pension. The benefits of the civil service pension, which were adopted in 1960, were far greater than those of the national pension scheme for private sector employees, which was launched in 1988. An analysis of representative civil servants' estimated lifetime earnings (the sum of working period salary and retirement benefits) compared to private sector workers found that the civil servants' lifetime earnings were slightly higher (Kim 2004).

Furthermore, there was a system in place that allowed former public officials to take positions in the private sector or diverse quasi-governmental organizations after retirement, thereby increasing their lifetime earnings (Cheng, Haggard, and Kang 1998). Some successful career public officials have advanced to political positions, such as vice ministers and ministers, as well as becoming congressmen or university professors. These practices encouraged public officials to work hard and attracted brilliant individuals to enter the government bureaucracy.

3. Bureaucratic power in the Korean developmental state

It is widely acknowledged that bureaucracies have been crucial to the economic development of East Asian nations such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (Johnson 1982; Amsden 1989; Evans 1998). In Korea, career bureaucrats were capable of effectively administering governmental matters. Before it ended in 1994, EPB, for instance, developed six successive five-year economic development plans (which changed to five-year economic and social development plans beginning with the fifth in 1982), and coordinated the implementation activities of the respective ministries. It was necessary to have a high degree of intellectual capacity in addition to management skills to successfully formulate and implement strategies for promoting economic development. Career bureaucrats with these capabilities were able to advance to key positions through speedy internal promotion within the merit-based personnel system (Choi 1991).

Civil servants actively contributed to economic policy and several other policy domains, including social policy. Another example of bureaucratic power under Park's government was the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs' adoption of the health insurance system in 1976 (Lee 2007, 11–12). President Park viewed social security systems as a means of boosting economic development and, therefore, hesitated to implement a mandatory medical insurance scheme. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs' social security technocrats aggressively campaigned for the implementation of mandatory insurance and made significant efforts to convince him to accept it. Park finally gave up on the Ministry's tenacity and adopted the mandatory medical insurance scheme.

The governance of the Korean development state can be characterized as bureaucratic governance. Bureaucratic governance refers to a system of social coordination where bureaucrats play a central role and actively promote collaboration among other actors in society (Yoon and Park 2016). During Park Chung-hee's presidency, the bureaucracy developed a mobilization system that engaged private sector actors in economic development and effectively used discipline to stimulate competition among these actors. The state bureaucracy's utilization of discipline over private actors, especially business enterprises, was a key aspect of its goal to drive industrialization (Amsden 1989, 14).

During that period, what were the main sources of bureaucratic power? First, bureaucrats possessed the legal authority to carry out their duties. Bureaucrats' legal authority served as the foundation for their ability to influence other actors (Rourke 1984; Meier 1993; Bark 1994, 96–99). Similar to Japan (Johnson 1995, 13), the Korean bureaucracy was responsible for drafting almost all laws, ordinances, regulations, and licenses that governed society. Moreover, it had extensive extra-legal powers to provide administrative guidance to actors in the private sector. Second, the government officials held a significant amount of skill and ability in their respective fields. The Park administration's bureaucracy consistently recruited individuals from the highest level of university graduates and provided them with the necessary education and training, resulting in a workforce that was more competent than any other social group. Collaboration with

PhD-level scholars at government research institutes such as the Korea Development Institute (KDI), a subsidiary of government ministries, enhanced their knowledge and skills. Third, bureaucrats possessed a significant amount of discretionary authority. During that period, the legislature had little independence and power, which resulted in bureaucrats having the ability to develop and execute policies without being subject to parliamentary oversight (Yoo 2011, 259). Fourth, officials were able to obtain and deploy resources such as budgets, organizations, and information. In comparison to the present day, the monopoly of information that bureaucrats wield has become their most valuable resource.

The final and most significant source of bureaucratic power was the president's unwavering confidence. President Park argued that parliamentary control over the bureaucracy was inefficient and ineffective, limiting the bureaucracy's capacity to develop and implement policies. In the policymaking process, he aspired to replace politics with administration. Nam Deok-woo, former Minister of Finance (1969–74) and Vice Prime Minister and Minister of EPB (1974–78), claimed in his memoirs that President Park frequently expressed, "I will handle politics, so you should focus on economic development" (Nam 2009, 209). In the same context, Kim Yong-hwan, who served as Minister of Finance from 1974 to 1978, said in his memoirs that President Park Chung-hee "blocked pressure from political circles, inspection agencies, and the military to ensure and encourage bureaucratic autonomy. Ironically, President Park, who came to office with military support, was the one who resisted the military's pressure" (Kim Y 2006, 298–99). President Park did not meddle in ministry personnel management, leaving it entirely to the minister. According to Kim Jeong-ryeom, the president's chief secretary's memoirs (Kim 2006, 481), "Since the minister exercised the appointment power from the division chief to the vice minister, the civil servants worked hard because only the minister's recognition would open the way to their success." Thus, under Park's reign, the bureaucracy was free to focus on attaining developmental goals without interference from political forces or economic interests.

General Chun Doo-hwan assumed power in a military coup in 1979 following the assassination of Park. Under Chun's authoritarian

government (1980–87), bureaucrats, particularly those in the field of economics, wielded significant power. This was due to the president's continued support, which was similar to that of his predecessor. President Chun Doo-hwan's robust endorsement facilitated the bureaucracy's vigorous pursuit of economic stabilization measures. President Chun Doo-hwan, similar to President Park, sought to address his lack of political legitimacy by placing a high priority on achieving economic stability and advancement. As a result, political power favored the national public service, allowing it to maintain its independence and authority under the Park Jung-hee and Chun Doo-whan administrations (Koo 2020).

IV. Democratization, NPM, relocation and waning of national public service

However, the Korean National Public Service has gradually declined since the 1990s due to three factors: political democratization, new public management reform, and the relocation of the central government complex. Political democratization and new public management reform have been combined to reduce bureaucratic power in South Korea since the 1990s. Between 2012 and 2014, the central government complex was relocated from Seoul to Sejong City, further decreasing the attractiveness and motivation of national public service.

1. Democratization and serving both the legislature and the political executive

Following the democratic transition in 1987, significant changes have occurred in the dynamics of the relationship between the executive and legislative branches. During the authoritarian era, the president's party gained control of the National Assembly by manipulating electoral laws in order to maintain the "president's block" (Heo and Stockton 2005; Kim 2017). Therefore, the role of the legislature was only to act as a rubber stamp, passively endorsing the executive's proposed policies without making significant changes to them (Park 1998). Public officials in the executive bureaucracy wielded significant influence over legislative procedures, coinciding with feeble parliamentary institutions (Im 1987). However, the 1992 parliamentary election, which

was the first election after the 1987 democratic transition, led to a divided government where the opposition parties secured a majority of seats. The divided government resulted from election law reform, which had previously disadvantaged opposition parties in the National Assembly during the authoritarian era (Park and Won 2008, 379). Afterwards, the Korean electorate has often granted the president's party seats that fall short of a majority. Consequently, the presence of a split government with a minority president's party has been a familiar occurrence in Korean politics (Kwak 2009). The executive and legislative branches share political authority when a split government forms. Legislative deadlocks regularly occur, reflecting the ongoing trend of diminishing presidential authority and the concurrent rise in parliamentary power (Jeon 2011; Kim 2017). The erosion of presidential authority became evident, particularly through the Constitutional Court's ruling that upheld the National Assembly's impeachment of President Park Geun Hye in the spring of 2017.

The changing power dynamics between the legislative and executive branches have had a significant impact on the roles of central government officials. First, public officials have put more resources and effort into dealing with lawmakers during the legislative process. In South Korea, both the executive branch and members of the National Assembly have the authority to submit legislative bills. Since the democratic transition, the number of laws proposed and enacted has risen dramatically. The National Assembly's increasing approval of legislation requires government officials to invest more time and effort in comprehending the legislative intents of lawmakers. Second, public officials must devote more time and resources to persuading National Assembly members throughout the budgeting process for their ministry. Before democratization, line ministries only had to negotiate with the budget agency and the president to obtain their budgets. After democratization, budget authorization required convincing National Assembly members. Third, public officials must respond to the National Assembly's increased inspection and investigation of government ministries. In 1987, the constitutional amendment reinstated the National Assembly's inspection authority over the executive branch. Aside from the 'investigation' of specific issues that most other nations have implemented, South Korea has also granted the National

Assembly to perform regular ‘inspections’ of the executive branch. Since the reinstatement of national inspections, the number of organizations subject to inspection by the National Assembly, the number of witnesses asked to testify, and the number of document submission requests have skyrocketed (Kim 2018). The amount of time and effort that public officials devote to preparing papers for national inspection, attending meetings, and answering inquiries has grown enormously.

The expanded role of the National Assembly in lawmaking, budget authorization, and national inspection has led to heightened tension and competitiveness between the executive and legislative branches. Consequently, the bureaucracy has become the focal point of their institutional rivalry. The executive authority of the president and the legislative authority of the National Assembly have simultaneously limited the bureaucracy as a result of these alterations. Hence, the national public service ought to serve two elected representatives: the president and the legislature.

2. New Public Management reform, financial crisis and bureaucracy bashing

The New Public Management (NPM) idea, concurrently with the process of democratization, significantly influenced the civil service reform in Korea. The political leadership’s criticism of the bureaucracy began in 1993, under Kim Young-sam’s presidency (1993–1998). Behind this was a mistrust of the bureaucracy, as well as the career bureaucrats who supported authoritarian political leadership at the expense of democratic principles. President Kim Young-sam aimed to establish a government that was both small and efficient. To achieve this, he attempted to downsize government ministries and the civil service, which had expanded significantly during the developmental period. In 1994, the Kim Young-sam administration abolished the EPB, which had served as the primary ministry of the developmental state bureaucracy for more than thirty years starting from 1961. The EPB was merged with the Ministry of Finance, resulting in the creation of the Ministry of Finance and Economy (MFE). The reorganization resulted in the establishment of four mega-ministries, one of which was MFE (Namkoong 2023).

At that time, it was acknowledged that general administrator-based personnel management, which had been successful throughout the period of industrialization, faced difficulties in properly responding to the increasingly globalized world. The Kim Young-sam government initiated a number of new public management reforms aimed at enhancing the expertise and competitiveness of public officials.

The 1997 Asian financial crisis (AFC), which occurred during the administration of Kim Yong-sam, served as a trigger for the expedited implementation of NPM reforms. The AFC was considered by Koreans as the worst crisis since the Korean War (1950–53). Following the onset of the financial crisis, the general public began to question the competence of the central government and the national public service in handling the crisis.

According to statistics from the World Values Survey (wvs), the level of confidence in the Korean government has experienced a significant decline, dropping from 43.8% in 1995 to 28.9% in 2000. The level of confidence in the civil service decreased from 77.6% in 1995 to 63.8% in 2000⁶. The loss of trust in the government and civil service after the 1997 AFC had accelerated the implementation of NPM reforms (Jung and Sung 2012; Lee and Han 2006). The Kim Dae-jung administration (1998–2003) implemented several NPM reforms, including reduction in the size of civil service, an agency evaluation scheme, preliminary feasibility study program, administrative service charter, regulatory impact assessment, privatization of public corporations, executive agency, performance-related pay scheme, budget saving incentive scheme, and open position system (OPS). Nevertheless, the majority of these tools have proven to be ineffective in the long run.

This section explores four significant NPM reforms that have diminished the role of the national public service and decreased the motivation of career bureaucrats. They are allowing lateral entry into senior public service positions, introducing performance-related pay, increasing public officials' obligations, and reforming the civil service pension.

1) Allowing lateral entry into Senior Public Service positions

Many Korean scholars have blamed the closed, rank-in-person system and frequent job-rotations or transfers of civil servants as one of the main factors in the failure to prevent the 1997 AFC (Choi 2021; Lee

and Han 2006). In response, elected officials, academics, and civil society leaders have fiercely advocated for lateral entry into senior positions to improve the closed system. This approach was followed by the introduction of the open position system (1999) and the Senior Civil Service (2006).

The Open Position System: In 1999, the Kim Dae-jung government implemented the Open Position System (ops). The ops designated open positions within 20 percent of senior positions, specifically deputy minister and director general-level positions in each central government ministry. The list of open positions later included director-level positions. The creation of the ops aimed to attract talented individuals from both the private and public sectors by diversifying recruitment methods for higher civil service positions (Namkoong 2007). The ops was founded on the assumption that the private sector had a reservoir of qualified individuals capable of managing higher public service positions. During the previous developmental state, the civil service monopolized the most brilliant people. In contrast, following democratization, outstanding university graduates joined a variety of organizations in the private sector and gained substantial experience. These private-sector talents would perform well in the open positions. In 1999, there were a total of 129 designated open positions. The ops picks the best candidate for a position through open competitive assessments that include applications from both within and outside the ministry (Namkoong 2000; 2003). Civilian experts appointed to an open position could serve for a minimum of three years, and they have the option to extend their service for an additional two years. In 2014, civilians filled only 14.9% of the open positions. Since the introduction of career-open positions in 2015, which restricted application and selection to civilians only, the proportion of civilian appointments has steadily increased. The number of open positions has risen to 473, representing a 367% increase in 2021. In 2021, the percentage of ops positions appointed from outside sources was 60.6, consisting of 45.2% civilians and 15.4% civil servants from other ministries (Namkoong 2023). Appointing civilians to open positions contributes to the specialization of the public service, whereas appointing civil servants from other ministries promotes cooperation across ministries and policy coordination. When

civilians join the OPS, they inject new ideas and expertise into the national public service. However, there is criticism that it might also reduce the opportunities for career public servants to make advancements, thereby restricting their motivation to succeed (Lee and Lee 2014).

The Senior Civil Service: In July 2006, the Rho Moo-hyun government established the Senior Civil Service (scs). The scs is the government's system for managing a group of senior civil servants (Namkoong 2007). Similar to the UK, Korea's scs attempted to change the closed, rank-in-person personnel system. It consists of around 1,500 positions at the director-general and higher levels of the central government. The scs is managed via a combination of open competition (OPS 20%), government-wide job postings (30%), and agency flexible management (50%). Former grades for scs positions (grades 1–3) were eliminated. scs members must undergo a competency evaluation procedure. Additionally, the use of performance agreements places more emphasis on performance and accountability. Previously, one's position and tenure determined remuneration; now, the complexity and significance of the duty, along with individual performance, determine it. According to Park and Cho (2013), the most notable accomplishment of the scs is the implementation of a personnel management system that is based on competencies. To become a member of the scs, director-level officials are required to complete competence training and successfully pass a competency assessment. The scs has intensified competition among its members for promotion, resulting in a significantly higher level of demand for self-management.

2) Performance appraisal and performance-related pay

Historically, intrinsic awards and honors, as opposed to extrinsic benefits, have been more effective in motivating civil servants. As a result, the concept of seniority determined the appraisals and rewards for public officials in Korea. However, following the 1997 AFC, the Kim Dea-jung administration implemented a performance-based pay (PRP) system as part of the NPM reform package (Namkoong, 2023). The government specifically designed the Performance-Related Pay (PRP) program to incentivize and compensate top performers among public

employees of the same pay grade, differentiating their salaries based on their individual performance. The government set up two variations of the PRP system. Government officials in grades 4 and above received a performance-based yearly remuneration. Conversely, mid- and lower-level government employees received an annual performance bonus. Following the establishment of scs in 2005, the PRP scheme split into job-based performance compensation for scs members, an annual salary for middle managers (grades 4 and 5), and a performance bonus for lower-grade officials (below grade 6).

During the initial stages of PRP implementation, there was substantial resistance and non-compliance, particularly among lower-grade government employees. In some cases, it was reported that they refunded performance bonuses and equitably distributed or assigned them to cover shared expenses (Ha 2023). Currently, there has been a decrease in the level of resistance. However, there is still a lack of faith in the fairness of the performance assessment system and PRP programs (Lee 2011; Choi 2017). According to empirical studies on the impacts of performance-based compensation on motivation and job performance, public employees, particularly those in lower grades, are skeptical about the effectiveness of performance-based pay (Lee and Lee 2007; Rho 2016). For instance, Rho's (2016) empirical study demonstrated that the intrinsic motives of public officials, as measured by their commitment to public values and compassion, positively influenced their job performance. However, extrinsic motivations, as measured by the validity and appropriateness of performance pay, had no significant effect on public servant job performance. As a result, despite its introduction more than 20 years ago as part of the NPM reforms, the Korean civil service has yet to completely embrace the PRP scheme.

3) Public officials' increasing obligations

Since the democratic transition in 1987, there have been significant alterations in the procedural and ethical standards, as well as the financial disclosure obligations, for public employees. The regulatory framework governing the conduct of public officials in carrying out their jobs has been expanded through the sequential enactment of several laws, including the Public Officials Property Registration System (1993), the Official Information Disclosure Act (1996), the Adminis-

trative Procedures Act (1996), the Corruption Prevention Act (2001), the Public Interest Whistleblower Protection Act (2011), the Anti-Graft Act (2016), and the Act on the Prevention of Conflict of Interest (2021). Due to increased regulatory obligations, public officials now face more scrutiny from the press, civil society organizations, and the general public than those in the private sector. Living in a transparent ‘goldfish bowl’ environment where their activities are continuously visible, public officials strive to avoid inspections, investigations, and civil complaints. As a result, their behaviour has become reactive rather than proactive, and their passion for the job has faded.

4) Civil service pension reform (2015)

In 2015, the National Assembly passed legislation to change the civil service pension system. The reform included increasing contributions, lowering the post-retirement payout rate, lengthening the age at which payments begin, and cutting the payment of survivors’ pensions (Namkoong 2023). As a result, the disparity between the benefits of the public service pension and the national pension for private sector employees has significantly decreased.

3. Central government complex relocation (2012–14) and the declining attractiveness of national public service

In 2002, President-elect Roh Moo-hyun announced a proposal to relocate the administrative capital to address the issue of overconcentration in the Seoul metropolitan area and promote balanced growth among regional areas. After a series of legislative and administrative processes, the Korean central government complex was relocated from Seoul to the newly constructed Sejong City, 150 kilometers away, in phases between 2012 and 2014. Meanwhile, other major constitutional institutions, including the National Assembly and the President’s Office, remained in Seoul. Consequently, the collaborative nature of most government responsibilities with these organizations presented significant challenges for central government officials. The consequences of moving to Sejong City go beyond the mere act of physically relocating (Jung 2019).

Several studies have examined how the central government's relocation affects various aspects of public officials' job performance and living conditions. Public officials who transferred to Sejong City were less satisfied than before with their commute, job environment, work efficiency, and residential conditions (Ryu and Hong, 2013). Relocation increased the expenses of communication and collaboration across central government departments and other organizations (Hur, Kwon, and Cho 2015; Ha and Kim 2018). Civil servants who moved to Sejong City were less satisfied with their jobs than those who stayed in Seoul, owing to the consequent work-life imbalance (Hur and Lee 2015; An, Shin, and Lee 2017). Following the move, public officials' sympathies fell dramatically (Jung 2019).

The relocation of the central government complex had greatly lowered the attractiveness of the national public service, as evidenced by a decrease in the number of civil service exam candidates and an increase in turnover. In the 1990s, the average competition ratio for the grade 5 civil service test was 70:1, but when democratization and NPM reforms began in the 2000s, the ratio dropped to an average of 50:1. After the relocation to Sejong City (2012–14) and the public service pension reform (2015), it further decreased to an average of 40:1⁷. Meanwhile, according to the annual public employee perception survey, the number of civil servants indicating an intention to leave their government jobs has increased considerably in recent years⁸. The proportion climbed from around 31% between 2013 and 2020 to 48.4% in 2022 and 43.4% in 2023. The percentage of respondents who ascribed the rationale to 'low pay level' climbed from 31.8% in 2020 to 63.3% in 2023. In reality, retention has become a serious issue in recent years, with an increase in voluntary resignations among younger civil servants with five years or less of service.

V. Summary and conclusion

The Joseon Dynasty's Confucian meritocracy, which involved the appointment of government officials based on competitive and objective examinations, serves as the basis for Korea's present-day public service system. Syngman Rhee's administration purportedly implemented a merit-based system after the founding of the Republic of Korea in

1948. However, cronyism hindered the operation of meritocracy. The primary focus of the national public service was to serve the ruling elite, not the people.

During the 1960s, the Park Chung-hee government sought to implement a developmental state strategy with meritocracy as a key component. Central government officials played a crucial role in bureaucratic governance during the 1970s and 1980s. This period might be the golden age of the national public service. An authoritarian, executive-based political structure founded this golden age. The ruling elite effectively rejected pressure from lawmakers and social actors such as corporate conglomerates (*chaebol*) and civil society organizations. Consequently, the interests of the national public service and the governing elite were essentially in alignment. However, the golden age of national public service began to fade in the mid-1990s due to the functioning of democracy, NPM reform, and the relocation of the central government complex.

With the increasing diversification of Korean society, it is quite unlikely that the national public service will be able to pick from among the best and brightest in society. However, the public service does retain a certain social status, which attracts college graduates who possess a higher level of public service motivation (PSM). Although the entry examinations for civil service are still extremely difficult and very competitive, individuals with high PSM levels have a greater likelihood of landing these jobs (Woo and Kim 2024). Therefore, the Korean government should take steps to further improve the public service's appeal, guaranteeing the retention of new government employees with high PSM and providing them with sufficient opportunities to develop their potential in serving the public and their representatives.

Acknowledgement: The author greatly appreciates the review of the manuscript and the insightful comments provided by Professors Park Chun-o, Kim Sangmook, Cho Kyung-ho, and Dr. Woo Harin.

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NOTES

1. The reasons for dismissal were as follows: violation of military service obligations (7,277 dismissals); evading military service (60); having concubines (1,047); corruption (1,938); patronage appointments (60); incompetence (908); political intervention (700); neglect of duty (424); and others (19,800).

2. See 1978 *Yearbook of Ministry of Government Administration*, p. 73.

3. There were three levels of open competitive examinations: higher-level for entry into grade 5 (former 3B), ordinary for grade 7 (former 4B), and clerical for grade 9 (former 5B).
4. See 1992 *Yearbook of the Ministry of Government Administration*, p. 116.
5. CSC (Civil Service Commission), 2002. *Survey of Public-Private Compensation Levels*, p. 32.
6. Source: World Values Survey data, available at <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>. The degree of confidence refers to the percentage of respondents who responded 'a great deal' and 'quite a lot' to the question "Could you tell me how much confidence you have in them? — a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence, or none at all" for each organization.
7. Data from the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Government (1991–99), Civil Service Commission (2000–07), Ministry of the Interior (2008–15) and Ministry of Personnel Management (2016–24).
8. Source: public employee perception survey, from 2013 to 2023, KIPA (Korean Institute of Public Administration).

9



Civil servants in The Netherlands

**From loyal contradiction
to just contradiction?**

SANDRA VAN THIEL

INTERNATIONALLY, THE DUTCH CIVIL SERVICE is known as a depoliticized, merit-based, and highly educated Weberian bureaucracy (EU, 2024). While most of these features are still present today, there have been two notable changes in the past decades. The first one is that although political appointments are still rare, there has been a clear increase in the level of functional politicization (Van Dorp, 2023; Hustedt & Salomonson, 2014), due to (i) structural changes in the civil service system and (ii) a surge in political volatility. The level of education of civil servants is still high, but the diversity of their educational background has risen. In other respects, diversity is however still low.

The second change concerns a decrease in the anonymity of civil servants, or vice versa an increase in their visibility. Attention given to civil servants — in the media and from politicians — has recently grown due to a number of scandals, in particular the Childcare Benefit affair in which the Tax Agency falsely accused parents of fraud, and the mishandling of earthquake damage to private houses in Groningen due to gas extraction. These scandals have highlighted the lack of attention, or disregard for policy implementation, among politicians and ministries (Van Thiel & Migchelbrink, 2023), as well as the inadequacies on the part of management in executive agencies in the training of civil servants.

Another more recent trend can be expected to exacerbate the visibility of civil servants even further in the coming years. This relates to the so-called ‘loyal contradiction’ that has always been an important feature of the Dutch civil service. It refers to the practice where civil servants — with different political preferences than their ministers — may offer different arguments and counterarguments in their policy advice. The ‘loyal’ aspect is premised on the fact that the debate remains internal. A younger generation of civil servants do not however seem to feel obliged to keep their opinion to themselves; they share their points of view openly, for example by opposing the official stance of the Dutch cabinet on the war in Gaza (NOS, 2023). This puts a

strain on political-administrative relations, which are under attack anyway by the new, right-wing cabinet that has come into office at the time of writing this chapter (July 2024).

This chapter will start with a brief overview of the Dutch civil service system and some information about the training of civil servants and their appointment. Next, I will go into the reforms that have taken place in the civil service system, during the heydays of New Public Management, in particular the establishment of the Senior Civil Service (*Algemene Bestuursdienst*, ABD) and the changes to the legal position of civil servants. Finally, I will discuss the recent scandals and how civil servants have become more visible in the eye of the public (and the media, and the politicians), and are under attack by the new cabinet.

The Dutch civil service system

The Dutch civil service is highly decentralized and compartmentalized (Van der Meer & Raadschelders, 1999). There are different trajectories for hiring, firing and promotion within the different ministries. This explains why staff mobility and promotions take mostly place within the same ministry or agency. Contrary to other countries, there is not one central career trajectory within the whole of the civil service — except for the highest ranks since the establishment of the Senior Civil Service (ABD) in 1995 (Van der Meer et al., 2014). I will describe the ABD in more detail in a later section. In 2003 the government did create one shared service agency (P-direkt) to provide HR services for all civil servants, for example for the payment of salaries. This agency collects HR data and produces an annual report with facts and figures on the number of fte, diversity and other relevant HR information (*Jaarrapportage Bedrijfsvoering Rijk*). According to the latest annual report, the Dutch national government is one of the most popular employers in the Netherlands, with almost 150,000 fte in 2023 — this includes all civil servants working in the ministries (estimated between 50,000 and 60,000 fte) and in a number of executive agencies such as the Tax Agency, the Prosecution Office, the Prison Service and the Roads & Waterworks Agency (almost 100,000 altogether).¹

Training background

There is no pre-entry education or examination for civil servants, except for some special groups such as diplomats, the judiciary, the police, and the army. For some of these groups, special academies have been established like the Netherlands Defense Academy (NLDA) and the Police Academy (*Politieacademie*).

Most policy-making civil servants working in the ministries have a higher education degree (47% in 2009), nowadays more often in the social and economic sciences (54%) than in law (23%) as the “legal monopoly has eroded over time” (Van der Meer, Kerkhoff & Van Osch, 2014, 3). These civil servants follow training programs on the job, offered by a range of institutions. Probably the largest program is the central trainee program (*Rijkstraineer Program*), organized by the Home Office. The program is offered to candidates with a master’s degree, who have been selected after the open application process. It lasts two years and is divided into four trial periods in different ministries, after which the civil servants make a choice for a particular ministry, for which they are offered a permanent position. Most trainees do not use their trial period to try out a position in an executive agency, a point to which I will return later on.

Political affiliations

Appointments of civil servants are not based on political grounds, but political preferences do play a role in other ways. For instance, political parties are interested in specific positions (but not all) and will try to nominate their own candidates. This applies for example to top positions in advisory bodies, and in case of some large executive agencies or regulators (Van Thiel, 2013, 2012). However, there are no guarantees for success due to the professionalization of recruitment procedures (*ibid.*). Appointments are thus primarily based on merit, but there is also an implicit system of distribution between political parties. Top positions in the public sector are more or less divided among the political parties, with the largest and oldest parties claiming the most positions. This distribution fits with the consensual nature of Dutch politics (Baakman, 2004). With the advent of more and new political parties in Dutch politics in recent years, it is not yet

clear if and how these new parties will also claim their positions, or whether the distribution system will change (Pellikaan, De Lange & Van der Meer, 2018).

Top-level civil servants are ten times more often members of a political party than the average Dutch citizen (2.8%; DPPC, 2021) — and then mostly progressive or left-wing parties. There is however an expectation that their personal political preferences do not affect their performance (Van der Meer & Raadschelders, 1999). In fact, it is quite common that ministers and their top civil servants do *not* belong to the same party. The congruence between the political preferences of ministers and secretaries-general in 2009 was 57%, while in 43% of the cases they had different political affiliations (Steen & Van der Meer, 2021). Such differences are arranged deliberately to create the so-called ‘loyal contradiction’ that I will discuss in more detail later. The three rules of the game for the relationship between ministers and top-level civil servants are: mutual respect, discretionary space, and reciprocal loyalty (Van Dorp & ‘t Hart, 2019). Top-level civil servants are thus expected to possess political sensitivity but not actively advocate their personal political preference.

Political conflicts between ministers and their top-level civil servants are rare and “[t]here is no hard evidence that a reshuffle of top civil servants takes place based on party political grounds after a change of government” (Van der Meer, 2004, 217). If this does occur — like in 2012 when the new minister of health Eduard Bomhoff of the populist party LPF instigated the departure of his secretary-general — it creates a lot of upheaval and raised eyebrows. Vice versa, the appointment of former politicians to civil service positions occurs only in very small numbers, like the appointment of former minister Alexander Pechtold to the driver’s license examinations agency CBR or former minister Wouter Koolmees as CEO of the Dutch railways company NS, and this is also met with a lot of comments (e.g., in the media).

A final noteworthy point about political aspects in the relationship between ministers and civil servants concerns the advent of the so-called political assistants or advisers (Van den Berg, 2018). The use of such assistants is small scale, especially when compared to other countries; Dutch ministers usually bring only one assistant with them when they enter office. The assistant is appointed temporarily, that is

if the minister leaves office, the assistant will also leave. There are thus no ‘cabinets’ like in other countries. There is however evidence that the increased use of and reliance on political assistants by ministers has forced top-level civil servants to adapt their way of advising the minister, focusing more on political-strategic aspects and overshadowing the substantive aspects (Belloir & Van den Berg, 2020). This is known as functional politicization (Hustedt & Salomonson, 2014). I will return to this development in more detail in the section below on the Senior Civil Service (ABD).

Representative bureaucracy, diversity

Rather than talking about representative bureaucracy, the Dutch debate revolves more around diversity (Van der Meer & Raadschelders, 2013). In the first decades of the 20th century, the Netherlands was divided into four pillars, predominantly based on religion. Catholics were underrepresented in society and hence also in the civil service, so attempts were made to remedy this. The de-pillarization from the 1960s on put an end to that discussion, but the influx of Muslim migrants from the 1970s introduced a new diversity gap. In the mid-2000s the cabinet came up with a diversity policy to increase the number of civil servants from non-western backgrounds, to attract more women, and generally to strive for diversity, also regarding age (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015). Targets were set for the public sector as a whole. Implementation was however carried out by individual ministries because of the decentralized nature of the civil service system.

Since then, diversity has improved, but not enough when compared to the targets that have been set. The Dutch civil service, particularly in the higher ranks, is still male dominated, predominantly white, with a higher education degree, and middle aged. The aforementioned annual report 2023 shows that out of the total workforce of almost 150,000 fte in 2023 at national level only 13% is younger than 30 years while 26% — twice as much — is older than 50. The division between men and women is 49%-51% respectively, but in the higher ranks (scale 15 and higher) the number of women is lower than the EU average: 39.6%. And the percentage of civil servants from non-European backgrounds is 19.6% in total, but lesser (9.6%) in the highest-ranking positions.

Improving the diversity of the civil service is still high on the agenda of the Home Office, the ministry in charge of coordination and policymaking regarding the civil service. At the same time, there are now more pressing problems such as recruitment because the labour market is tight, and the government has to compete with other employers (as mentioned in the 2023 report by the Home Office).

Reforms of the Dutch civil service system

New Public Management reforms were introduced in the Dutch public sector from the early 1980s on (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). At first, personnel effects were limited to a reduction in the number of civil servants working in ministries. Reforms of the HR policies only came later (Van der Meer, Steen & Wille, 2015; Steijn & Leisink, 2007), most notably with the establishment of the Senior Civil Service (ABD) in 1995 and the so-called ‘normalization’ of the legal position of civil servants in 2017.

Reduction of the number of civil servants

New Public Management became popular from the early 1980s on when a new cabinet came into office (Lubbers I). To combat the fiscal crisis, government had to become more efficient and cost-effective. A large program of reforms was initiated, consisting of budget cuts and the delegation of tasks to subnational governments (Kickert, 1997). Privatizations were undertaken as well, but only in small numbers as the Dutch government preferred a ‘softer’ strategy for creating executive agencies. Government units were hived off and granted some managerial autonomy. Because the civil servants who used to work in these units were now employed by the agencies — because of the compartmentalized structure of the Dutch civil service — they were no longer listed as employees of the ministries. This was presented as a reduction of the number of civil servants, fitting with the aims of the NPM-reforms, although this strategy did not really lead to less public sector workers. At the same time, ministries also had to let go of civil servants. To fill the gaps that arose from these measures, new employees were hired based on temporary contracts and/or as independent workers for specific functions. Sometimes these independent

workers were actually civil servants who had been let go earlier (aptly named ‘*draaideur*’ or revolving door civil servants).

All in all, attempts to reduce the number of civil servants have had some success, but mostly on paper as in reality the number of employees performing public tasks has probably been relatively steady over time (around 100,000 fte), and recently even slightly increasing (to almost 150,000 fte). Exact figures are difficult to provide because of the ambiguity of definitions and inclusion of different categories of public organizations such as the executive agencies. In June 2024, the new cabinet announced a reduction of policymaking civil servants of 22% (civil servants in executive agencies are excluded from this reduction). It is not clear if and how it will achieve this.

Senior Civil Service

In 1995, a major reform of the Dutch civil service was introduced with the establishment of the Senior Civil Service (*Algemene Bestuursdienst*, ABD). All civil servants in the highest ranks (pay scale 15 and above, such as director-general, secretary-general and a few directors or chairpersons) belong to the same pool. All ABD-members are employed by the Home Office. Nowadays, more than 1,500 civil servants belong to this pool. It should be noted though that not every top-level public official is a member of ABD; particularly several top CEOs of executive agencies are not included.

The establishment of the ABD introduced more career-centred elements to combat the silo-effects of the compartmentalized structure of the Dutch civil service. The aims of the establishment of the ABD were to increase the professionalization and flexibility of the senior civil service, to improve internal cohesion within the civil service, and to enhance political control (NSOB, 2023). Flexibility was to be achieved through mandatory interdepartmental (horizontal) mobility following the 3-5-7 rule which refers to the length of appointments of ABD-members in the same position: minimum three years and maximum seven years (Van der Meer & Raadschelders, 1999). After 3, 5 or 7 years the top-level civil servant is expected to move to another position.

The ABD is in charge of the recruitment process for top positions in public sector organizations, predominantly ministries but sometime also executive agencies or lower-level governments. They also offer a

Management Development program, but this is not mandatory for ABD-members. A separate branch called ABD-TopConsult refers to a small group of experienced senior civil servants, who are no longer working within the civil service or have retired, and who are offering their knowledge and experience to give advice to improve the functioning of the public sector.

More recently, the ABD has started to emphasize the need to improve the leadership of civil servants, in order to achieve more 'societal impact'. This fits with the call for more attention to the craftsmanship of civil servants ('t Hart, 2014). It reflects a change in the orientation of the ABD, away from a focus on management skills (NPM) to more attention on collaboration and public value (Van der Wal, 2023, 2017).

Two recent evaluations of the ABD show some success but also some problems (Noordegraaf et al., 2020; NSOB, 2023). Mobility has indeed increased. ABD-members stay on average 4.5 years in the same position (measured in 2023) and 92% of them change positions according to the 3-5-7 rule. At the top of ministries, silos have become less segmented but crossovers from policy-making ministries to policy implementing executive agencies are still limited. The ABD is in charge of the recruitment process but is not effective enough; the ministries remain in the lead and decide who they want to hire. As a result, diversity is lagging, and the influx of external candidates (outside from the public sector) is too low. Finally, the evaluation reports rebuke the fact that the MD-training program is not mandatory and propose that more discussion is needed about the exact mix of knowledge and skills that top-level civil servants must have (see also WRR, 2024; Van Dorp & 't Hart, 2019). Survey research shows that they see themselves as a policy advisor first, then as a manager and only last as a leader (Steen & Van der Meer, 2011). Management skills are not the priority of top-level civil servants (Van Thiel, Steijn & Allix, 2007; Noordegraaf, 2001).

The increased mobility of top-level civil servants is not without criticism. The ABD is being blamed for having paid more attention to the person-environment fit (*Dienstwissen*) than the person-job fit (*Fachwissen*). The importance of substantive knowledge has subsided (Van der Meer & Dijkstra, 2021, 309-310). Instead, top-level civil servants pay much more attention to political and strategic aspects of policymaking and the parliamentary decision-making. This is known

as functional politicization (Van Dorp, 2023; Hustedt & Salomonson, 2014). The following two quotes illustrate this criticism:

“it is indisputable that the consensus amongst them [top civil servants, ed.] was that substantive expertise had come under some strain. The respondents were reportedly not entirely in favour of these changes, as politicians seemed to have combined the substantive expertise with political-strategic advice. [...] This may, however, also be due to regulations from the [ABD] that state that senior civil servants may only remain in a position for a maximum of seven years before having to move on [...] the substantive expertise appears to have been overshadowed by the political-strategic oversight.” (Belloir & Van den Berg, 2020, 66)

“While the ABD was not originally intended as an instrument to strengthen political control, functional mobility can be seen as a powerful instrument to erode the power base of top civil servants [...] The ABD is used as a tool to change the civil service culture and establish a government-wide esprit de corps, which in turn enables the making of the civil service more responsive to political demands.” (Steen & Van der Meer, 2011, 229)

Next to mobility, other causes are mentioned to have contributed to the growing functional politicization (Belloir & Van den Berg, 2020). For example, the increased political volatility is mentioned. This refers to, among others: the political fragmentation i.e. the increase in the number of political parties in the Netherlands; the increased polarization in the political debate, also attributed to the rise of populist parties; the need to create larger coalitions, with more parties, but with smaller majorities in parliament; the shorter term of cabinets; and the increase in the number of incidents in policy implementation in recent years, which have led to more frequent resignations of ministers and cabinets (Pellikaan et al., 2018). Furthermore, the increased use of and reliance on political assistants by ministers has forced top civil servants to adapt their way of advising the minister, focusing more on political-strategic aspects and overshadowing

the substantive aspects (Van den Berg, 2018).

The loss of substantive knowledge can also be explained by the large-scale establishment of executive agencies in the past decades. Hiving off parts of the government bureaucracy, including the civil servants who are doing the work, means that ministries have also lost the personnel who possess relevant expertise about the task and the regulations related to the task (Pollitt, 2009). Moreover, ministries have not yet — or not adequately — mastered the necessary knowledge and skills to manage agencies that are operating at arm's length (Van Thiel, 2024). A parliamentary inquiry concluded that civil servants working in ministries are 'only serving the minister, not the citizens' (TCU, 2021, my translation) which has also been at the root of recent scandals in policy implementation (see more below).

'Normalization' of legal position

In 2006, members of parliament initiated a discussion on the legal position of civil servants, and whether this should not be made more comparable to the position of employees in the private sector. After much debate, a law was passed in 2017 and implemented from January 2020 on. This law is known as the 'normalization' law (Steijn & Leisink, 2007). It makes it easier to fire civil servants, whose position was strongly protected until then by the previous law, which dates back to 1929. Civil servants now have a contract on similar conditions as private sector employees, based on civil law instead of public law. Exceptions have been made for the army and the judiciary as their positions require more continuity and impartiality. The police have their own regulations, laid down in a so-called collective labour agreement (CAO), to ensure their unique position.

The normalization did not affect existing regulations about special features for public officials, for example about having to deal with secrets, the need to report avocations, and the prohibition to accept gifts. The salaries system and other secondary terms of employment have remained the same for civil servants working for the national government. The normalization law prescribes the need to create CAOs for other parts of the public sector, besides the ministries. There are now fourteen different CAOs for specific parts of the public sector, for instance universities, municipalities, and the broadcasting companies. Some executive

agencies² have their own CAO or they can use existing private sector CAOs, if that fits with the policy sector in which they operate.

While the normalization aimed to make the legal position of civil servants more comparable to that of private sector employees, there is one important aspect in which their positions are different: the salaries for higher ranking civil servants have been capped by the WNT-law (*Wet Normering Topinkomens*) which was implemented in 2013. The cap is based on the salary of the prime minister and was named after the prime minister of 2013 (Balkenende). In 2022 the maximum salary for a top-level official in the public sector was 216,000 euros, including surcharges. This cap does not only apply to civil servants but to everybody who works in the public sector, so also, for example, in universities and the broadcasting companies. Every year, the Home Office reports on infringements that have been made to the cap, which always attracts a lot of media attention.

Increased visibility of civil servants

Recently, the public image of civil servants has come under attack, most importantly because of a number of incidents in policy implementation, such as the Childcare Benefit scandal and the problems in Groningen involving damage to houses due to gas extraction. These incidents have attracted a lot of media attention and have become the subject of multiple parliamentary inquiries. Questions have been raised about the *individual* responsibility and accountability of civil servants, even to the extent that the cabinet asked for an investigation by the Prosecution Office — which did not lead to any prosecution. In the end, the Dutch cabinet resigned over the Childcare Benefit scandal in 2021, and in 2024 the gas extraction in Groningen has been terminated. Programs to compensate victims in both incidents are still ongoing at the time of writing this chapter.

These incidents and their fallout have increased the visibility of civil servants and their work. Civil servants have been publicly interviewed in the parliamentary inquiries, which were also broadcasted and streamed online. The media have written countless stories, including stories about the civil servants who were involved (sometimes mentioned by name). At the same time, we have witnessed that civil

servants are seeking media attention themselves more often (see examples below). These developments put new strains on the political-administrative relations.

Scandals in policy implementation

The Childcare Benefit scandal is one of the biggest affairs in Dutch government (Van Thiel & Migchelbrink, 2023). It revolves around the Tax Agency, part of the Ministry of Finance, which wrongly accused parents of fraud, forcing them to pay back benefits plus fines. This led to large financial problems, eventually even to divorce, bankruptcy, homelessness, and loss of custody. There are different causes: the law did not offer any discretion to correct mistakes, high political pressure to combat fraud, signals from civil servants (and whistleblowers) were not listened to, and the Tax Agency suffered from operational problems (ICT, personnel). Several investigations were undertaken to determine the causes and develop solutions, including two parliamentary inquiries.

At the same time, other studies were launched, both by civil servants (*ABDTopconsult*) and by parliament (TCU, 2021), to analyze problems in policy implementation and executive agencies more generally. And new parliamentary inquiries were launched to investigate other scandals, such as the damage to houses in Groningen as a result of gas extraction, and the anti-fraud policies of the government. During this whole period, say 2014–2019, it became clear that policy implementation had been neglected by politicians and ministries for a long time. There are several explanations for this lack of attention (Van den Berg, Warsen, Migchelbrink & Van Thiel, in review). For one, it was prohibited for a long time for civil servants to talk directly to politicians. This is known as Ukase Kok (in Dutch: *Oekaze Kok*) named after the prime minister who developed this rule, to safeguard the vertical lines of ministerial accountability. The rule has been made less restrictive since then, but there is still very little information exchange between politicians and civil servants (including executive agencies). Moreover, the relationships between policymaking civil servants in the ministries and policy implementation civil servants in executive agencies are often problematic and underdeveloped (Van Thiel, 2024). As I have explained before, there is little mobility between these different parts of the civil service

meaning that they are different worlds. In the wake of the implementation scandals and the changing attention paid to policy implementation, two government-wide programs have been launched (*Werk Aan Uitvoering*, *Staat van de Uitvoering*) to improve the cooperation between policymaking and implementation. It is probably too soon to show real results, but these programs have led to more self-awareness and articulation by executive agencies, see also the next point.

Loyal contradiction or just contradiction?

Above, I have explained the role of ‘loyal contradiction’ in the Dutch civil service. Civil servants may have and express different viewpoints than their minister, as long as the discussion remains internal (Van der Meer & Dijkstra, 2021). Recently, however, we have seen civil servants actively seeking media attention to discuss the problems they are experiencing in their job, particularly because of excessive political interference. For example, inspectors talked openly (giving their names) about the need to be able to carry out their tasks independently (NRC, 2023a), and 20+ police officers complained about politicians imposing too many targets for too few resources (NRC, 2023b). Other examples are easily found, also at subnational government levels. But the most extreme case is probably the statement by more than 250 young civil servants in which they openly opposed the official government position about Israel going to war in Gaza (NOS, 2023).

There are different ways of interpreting these events. It can be related to the increased self-awareness and articulation mentioned before. But it could also be seen as a clear case of ‘speaking truth to power’, voice or even whistleblowing. It could be facilitated by the ease of use of the social media, particularly among younger civil servants. More research would be necessary to determine the causes of this increased expression and visibility. But it is clear that it may increase tensions between civil servants and politicians/ministers (Van der Wal, 2023; Van der Meer, 2004):

“Civil service power is said to have grown at the expense of ministerial and, in particular, parliamentary power. [...] Although this conclusion is widely accepted in political science and public administration [...] Many politicians still profess

a formal ‘Weberian style’ doctrine of full ministerial responsibility and civil service loyalty.” (Van der Meer, 2013: 207).

These tensions may become exacerbated because of the new coalition that came into office in July 2024. It has a very different political signature (extreme right-wing) than before, which is also different from the political preferences of most civil servants (social democrat or progressive). The first strike has already been announced by the new cabinet: it aims to reduce the number of policymaking civil servants by 22%. Interestingly, the cabinet is led by a former top-level civil servant (Dick Schoof), with no political affiliations. He is, among others, the former chief of the secret service. His cabinet consists of mostly inexperienced politicians, while the political leaders of the four coalition parties have stayed in parliament.³

Conclusion

Traditionally, the Dutch civil service was known to be depoliticized and merit based. It is highly compartmentalized, which means that there is little mobility between ministries (only within ministries), and between ministries and executive agencies. The only exception is at the top, because of the establishment of the Senior Civil Service in 1995, as part of a range of NPM based reforms. The increased mobility of top-level civil servants has led to a loss of *Fachwissen* and more functional politicization. This development has received criticism, both from parliament, academia and in the media.

Furthermore, as a result of certain events particularly a number of policy implementation scandals, civil servants have become more visible, in the media, to politicians, and to the general public. At the same time, we see civil servants speaking out more often and more openly, taking their ‘loyal contradiction’ to a new level. This puts strains on the political-administrative relations. The arrival of a new cabinet, composed of extreme right-wing parties and led by a former top-level civil servant, could be expected to fuel these tensions even further.

Whether there was ever a ‘golden age’ for Dutch civil servants is difficult to say. There was not much attention paid to them before, but because of the changes discussed in this chapter they have become

more visible — and not always in a good way. Criticism has increased, and this has led some civil servants to respond and defend (or explain) themselves more, and more openly, than before.

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NOTES

1. There are different legal types of executive agencies: *agentschappen* (type 1) whose employees are civil servants; ZBOs (type 2) that may have their own labor agreements or follow the civil service regulations; and state-owned enterprises (type 3) which are private law-based firms (Van Thiel, 2012). Only employees from type 1 and some type 2 agencies are counted as civil servants.
2. This applies only to type 2 agencies (ZBOs) with legal personality.
3. Another interesting fact in this regard is that the formation of the new coalition was in large part done by another former top-level civil servant (Richard van Zwol), who became a member of the Council of the State after a long career as financial policy advisor in two ministries.

10

Civil service,
an enduring
passion française

VINCENT MARTIGNY

“What is missing today is this experience, this method, this democratic rooting, which did not prevent us when we were in office from respecting the State and the senior administration, which, in a country like France, cannot be neglected, cannot be turned upside down without risk. I think that those who govern us do not have enough of a sense of State and do not know enough about society.”

— Lionel Jospin (former Prime Minister, 1997–2002),
February 2024

THE FRENCH CIVIL SERVICE has undergone a profound transformation in recent decades, transitioning from a period of unparalleled prestige and influence to one marked by increasing challenges and criticisms. The civil service was long considered the “showcase” of France, illustrating the country’s exceptionalism with its prestigious symbols, heroic figures, and undisputed achievements. For centuries, it existed as an autonomous institution, differentiated by its specialized administrative law and highly fragmented into various corps and ministries. Until now, the 5.5 million civil servants are regulated by both a statutory law setting out the civil service code for all its members, and a ‘highly fragmented structure’ (Bezes & Jeannot, 2011) linked to the existence of a senior State management structure divided into ‘Corps’ (1,500 to 2,000, e.g. around 15,000 members), each with its own recruitment, promotion and remuneration logic (Eymeri-Douzans, 2022). This longstanding administrative structure was reinforced during the Fourth and Fifth Republics, where the civil service offered upward mobility for the lower and middle classes, while serving as a necessary steppingstone for the upper classes to enter politics (Suleiman, 1978, Birnbaum, 1994). The service was trusted and supported by political power, notably under the Gaullist regime, and the

position and social prestige of senior civil servants became even stronger during this period (Bezes & Jeannot, 2011). The civil service has therefore played a pivotal role in the nation's socio-economic development, particularly during the post-World War II era, which is often referred to as its "Golden Age". This period, spanning from the late 1940s to the 1970s, was characterized by unprecedented economic growth, robust state intervention, and a professional and efficient civil service. This entire period has been one of renewed celebration of the State and the civil service as central to the expression of the general interest and social cohesion, driven by a political consensus around its protection and promotion between the various political forces, from Gaullism to Socialism. Its history obviously predates the post-war reconstruction, but it was able to rely on a central training school, the ENA, and on institutions — the Grand Corps de l'Etat, but also on a solid and loyal senior administration, regardless of political alternations. In a country with a limited spoils system, the figure of the 'Grand Commis d'Etat' (in the sense of a loyal and disinterested servant) has been a reassuring and unifying myth for generations, but also an envied and criticized symbol of state nobility (Bourdieu, 1989).

Such attachment has also been made possible by a very French concept, that of '*service public*'. This protean notion, forged in the middle of the 19th century and at the heart of the French administrative law system, can designate, in the material sense, an activity of general interest, undertaken by a public person by means of prerogatives of public powers, or, in the metonymic sense, the body managing a public service, i.e. a public administration. But in fact, public authority, public powers, public administration and public service are often used interchangeably. This confusion has contributed to the development of a veritable 'myth' of the public service in France, a concept that combines social entity, legal notion and ideological operation in the service of the image of a benevolent, generous state concerned solely with the general welfare (Chevallier, 2022). It is therefore seen as part of the 'Republican pact', affecting the political system itself.

How then can it be explained that, in the absence of any apparent political change in the relationship between political elites and citizens and the State, the issue of the decline of the civil service and the State is so central in contemporary French politics and in the trajectory of

public policies? The political debate surrounding the role of the civil service is fueled by paradoxes which are themselves those of French public opinion vis-à-vis the State, which Pierre Sadran summed up in an emblematic phrase: “The French denigrate civil servants and venerate the State. They laugh at the carelessness of the administration and fear the omnipotence of technocrats. They demand ever more public services and call for a ‘frugal’ State.” (Sadran, 1992).

This chapter explores the factors that contributed to this Golden Age, the subsequent changes and challenges, and the current state of the French civil service. The aim of this work is to study the historical trajectory of attachment to the public service since the end of the Second World War in France. We will look at three distinct periods: a Golden Age of civil service from 1945 to the second oil crisis in 1979; a decline of civil service in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, under the impact of the neo-liberal ideology imported into France from Ronald Reagan’s United States and Margaret Thatcher’s United Kingdom, followed by a desire to streamline the State; and finally, the period following the global financial crisis, which saw the legitimacy of state intervention and civil service re-emerge, accompanied by a redefinition of its modalities, notably through the introduction of some methods of New Public Management (Bezes, 2009). We will also focus on the consequences of these transformations for public trust in the civil service. The backlash of the State in the public opinion perception has generated what we call a “phantom of the State”, fueling the resentment of part of public opinion towards the decline of public services. We will argue that this perception plays a strong part in the rise of anti-system parties such as the National Rally and the feeling of enduring political crisis that dominates the French public debate.

A long Golden Age

The end of World War II left France in a state of devastation, with a pressing need for reconstruction and modernization. The destruction wrought during the war, the millions of homeless French people, the collapse of the infrastructure as a result of both Resistance against the German occupation and the liberation of the country by the Allies from 1943 onwards, had left the political and administrative institu-

tional system bled dry. Immediately after the war, the establishment of the Fourth Republic in 1946 and later the Fifth Republic in 1958, under the leadership of Charles de Gaulle, provided a stable political framework for the efforts of the French civil service. The French government embarked on an ambitious program of economic planning and state intervention, leading to the rapid industrialization and modernization of the economy (Hall, 1986). The implementation of the Monnet Plan (1947–1952), named after Jean Monnet, the Commissioner-General of the National Planning Board, was instrumental in the recovery process. This plan focused on key sectors such as coal, steel, electricity, transportation, and agriculture, aiming to boost productivity and rebuild the country's infrastructure. The success of the Monnet Plan laid the foundation for sustained economic growth during the subsequent decades, often referred to as the “Trente Glorieuses” (Fourastié, 1979). The post-war period also saw the establishment and expansion of the French welfare state. Inspired by the principles of social justice and equality, the French government introduced a range of social welfare programs, including universal healthcare, social security, unemployment benefits, and public housing. These programs were designed to reduce social inequalities and provide a safety net for all citizens (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The expansion of the welfare state required a significant increase in the size and scope of the civil service. New administrative bodies and public institutions were created to manage and deliver these services, leading to the professionalization and specialization of the civil service. The mood of 1945 was dominated by both the desire to rebuild a system and at the same time to turn one's back on certain concepts of the civil service that had been seen as the source of France's collapse in 1940 and the establishment of the Vichy regime. This dual opposition to Vichy and to the Third Republic, which had been blamed for the defeat, shaped the new civil service system in a number of ways. Firstly, the aim was to train new State managers able of meeting the challenges of reconstruction. Secondly, although the “founding fathers” of the reconstruction rejected political recruitment for the senior civil service (Kessler, 2003), their idea was to create a new civil service aimed at erasing the shame of the collaboration of the pre-War senior civil service with Nazi Germany. Therefore, the ambition was

to recruit civil servants in line with both the ideals of the Resistance and more directly General De Gaulle and the liberators of the country. Parallel to this aim was a desire to prevent the Haute administration from falling into the hands of the Communists.

It was against this backdrop that Michel Debré and General De Gaulle devised the creation of the *École nationale d'administration* (ENA) in 1945, with the aim of making up for the inadequacies of the *Ecole libre des sciences politiques* (now Sciences Po), which had been deemed insufficient in the training of pre-war elites and held responsible for the moral and political collapse that accompanied the invasion of the country by the Germans. The ENA played a crucial role in training a new generation of civil servants equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to administer the expanding welfare state (Suleiman, 1978). It saw the emergence of a new generation of senior civil servants obsessed with economic recovery policies and planning, which at the time was the general spirit of the French bureaucracy, both among the Gaullist faithful and in the socialist and communist opposition. This reconstruction, through State planning of the economy and the creation of the ENA, established a new public service and ushered in a period in which the civil service became very attractive, resurrecting the figure of the 'Commis d'Etat', the civil servant devoted to public service and serving the general interest.

A number of factors were characteristic of the Golden Age that was opening up for the new French civil service. One of them was the high degree of centralization and state intervention in economic and social affairs. The French state played a leading role in directing economic development, regulating industries, and providing public services. This centralization was facilitated by a highly organized and professional civil service that operated under a hierarchical structure (Birnbaum, 1994). The civil service was seen as the backbone of the state, responsible for implementing government policies and ensuring the efficient functioning of public institutions. Civil servants enjoyed a high level of job security, social status, and professional autonomy, which contributed to their commitment and dedication to public service (Eymeri-Douzans & Pierre, 2011). The establishment of ENA marked a significant shift towards meritocracy and professionalism in the French civil service. ENA was designed to recruit and train the best

and brightest individuals, regardless of their social background, based on competitive examinations. Graduates of ENA, known as “*énarques*,” quickly rose to prominent positions within the civil service, bringing with them a strong sense of duty and a commitment to the principles of the Republic (Suleiman, 1978). The emphasis on meritocracy and professional training helped to enhance the competence and efficiency of the civil service. Civil servants were expected to possess a high level of expertise and to uphold the values of impartiality, neutrality, and public interest. In addition, the low number of bridges between the public and private sectors, as indicated by the very long time spent in the civil service before *énarques* moved to the private sector — between seventeen and twenty years on average until the 1980s (Rouban, 2014) — was another factor in the stability of the *Haute fonction publique*, but also an indication of its level of attractiveness and prestige. This professional ethos contributed to the effective implementation of government policies and the successful management of public services (Thoenig, 2003).

Another dimension of this Golden Age was also the rise of technocratic governance. Technocrats, often trained at elite institutions like ENA and Polytechnique, played a central role in formulating and implementing public policies. These technocrats brought a scientific and rational approach to governance, emphasizing evidence-based decision-making, planning, and efficiency (Hall, 1986). The technocratic model of governance was particularly evident in economic planning and industrial policy. The government established a series of national plans, coordinated by the General Planning Commission, to guide economic development and allocate resources strategically. This planning approach helped to drive economic growth and modernization, positioning France as a leading industrial power in Europe.

Changes and challenges (1970s–2000s)

The late 1970s marked the beginning of significant changes and challenges for the French civil service. The global economic crisis of the 1970s, triggered by the oil shocks of 1973 and 1979, led to a period of stagflation characterized by high inflation, rising unemployment, and slow economic growth. The crisis exposed the limitations of the state-

led model of economic development and the inefficiencies within the public sector (Hall, 1986, Bezes, 2009). The economic downturn put pressure on public finances, leading to budget deficits and increasing public debt. The government faced growing demands for fiscal austerity and public sector reform, challenging the existing model of state intervention and welfare provision. The economic difficulties prompted a re-evaluation of the role of the state in the economy. Neo-liberal economic policies, emphasizing privatization, deregulation, and market-oriented reforms, gained prominence. These policies aimed to reduce the fiscal burden on the state, enhance efficiency, and promote private sector-led growth. The shift towards neoliberalism represented a departure from the state-centric economic model of the Golden Age. The election of President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1974 and later President François Mitterrand in 1981 brought political shifts that further impacted the civil service. Giscard d'Estaing's administration introduced some reforms aimed at reducing state intervention and promoting market mechanisms.

From the 1980s onwards, the pressure put on the civil service increased. The victory of the Socialist Party in the 1981 elections and the election of François Mitterrand could have heralded the return of a 'Master State', as Pierre Mauroy, then Prime Minister, named it. Yet, Mitterrand's initial socialist policies in the early 1980s, which included nationalizations and increased public spending, were quickly reversed in the face of economic realities. The 'turn to austerity' (*tournant de la rigueur*) in 1983 sounded the death knell for the first two years of François Mitterrand's seven-year term, during which the ambition of a 'break with capitalism' had dominated. A climate of economic deregulation began to sweep France. In his first speech to Parliament in July 1984, Prime Minister Laurent Fabius, insisted that 'the State has reached its limits. It must not exceed them. The main responsibility for modernization lies with businesses. They must therefore have the support of the whole country' (Fabius, 1984). The influence of the neo-liberal ideas of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher on the French Right but also on the Socialist government, was very clear, as evidenced by François Mitterrand's 1984 visit to Silicon Valley in California, where the Socialist President praised free enterprise from that time onwards. This reversal was accentuated by the first cohabitation,

which saw a right-wing coalition come to power under the leadership of Jacques Chirac in 1986. The adoption of austerity measures and market-oriented reforms signaled a shift towards neoliberalism. These changes reflected broader global trends and pressures from international organizations such as the IMF and the OECD which promoted public sector reforms (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011, Clift, 2018). One of the key policy responses to the economic challenges was the privatization of state-owned enterprises under the Chirac 'cohabitation' government (1986-1988). The government embarked on a series of privatization programs, selling off major public enterprises previously nationalized in 1981 in sectors such as telecommunications, banking, and transportation. Privatization aimed to reduce public debt, attract private investment, and increase competition.

The 80s and 90s became years of major deregulation of the economy, with Lionel Jospin's Socialist government not halting this trend between 1997 and 2002, but on the contrary, accentuating it with a series of privatizations that accelerated at the end of the 90s. Within the civil service itself, the emergence of a 'customer' concept changed the nature of the idea of public service, where the imperatives of performance and competitiveness were gradually taking over. From Jacques Chirac's first term in office in 1995, under Alain Juppé's government, which led to major strikes against public service reform in December 1995, the role of the State and the civil service was called into question by the French Right, which was taking a turn towards economic liberalism. Despite the failure of the Juppé government to impose its reforms, political space emerged for criticism of the State and civil servants.

The civil service was also subject to significant reforms during this period. Efforts were made to streamline public administration, reduce bureaucracy, and improve efficiency. First New Public Management practices, inspired by private sector models, emphasizing performance measurement and customer orientation started to be introduced by both left-wing and right-wing governments during this period. The *Renouveau du Service Public* (Renewal of Public Service) movement launched under the Michel Rocard government (1988-1991) insisted that the development of the civil service should be connected to greater managerial freedom and accountability for performance on service de-

livery, on contracts rather than rules (Chevauchez, 2007). The goal was to professionalize the civil service, enhance managerial skills, and foster a culture of efficiency and innovation (Suleiman, 2003). The first performance indicators and targets were also established for various public services, with regular monitoring and evaluation to assess progress. The aim was to shift the focus from input-based management (e.g., budget allocation) to output and outcome-based management (e.g., service quality and impact) (Hood, 1991). Reforms included the introduction of performance-based budgeting, decentralization of administrative functions, and the promotion of managerial autonomy. It also included outsourcing, competitive tendering, and the creation of quasi-markets where public services were delivered by private providers under contract with the government (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). However, New Public Management ideas did develop and diffuse in the French context with specific institutional constraints (Rouban, 2008; Bezes, 2012), and their impact has long been weaker than in other European countries (Bezes, 2009).

The civil service also had to adapt to the new regulatory and institutional framework of the EU in the course of the 1980s and 1990s. This required coordination with European institutions, compliance with EU regulations, and participation in the formulation of European policies, the increased complexity of governance and the need for international collaboration posed new challenges for the civil service. Such reforms have been accompanied by a transformation in the training of the State's elites. At the ENA, for example, the new classes have seen an increase in the proportion of economic profiles trained in the major business schools, to the detriment of the classical humanities (Birnbaum, 2018). At that time, the emergence of the figure of the cold technocrat, based on the new methods of public management, gained ground in public opinion, to the detriment of the figure of the disinterested *Commis d'Etat*, eroding the prestige of the administrative elites (Schmidt, 1990).

NPM and the turn of the Sarkozy mandate

Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency from 2007 to 2012 accelerated the reforms aimed at modernizing and transforming the French civil service,

driven by a desire to improve efficiency, reduce public spending, and adapt to the changing global economic environment. Sarkozy's reform agenda emphasized fiscal discipline and efficiency in public administration. He aimed to break from the traditional model of the French welfare state and civil service, advocating for a more flexible, performance-oriented, and cost-effective public administration. One of the cornerstone initiatives of Sarkozy's reform agenda was the General Review of Public Policies (*Révision Générale des Politiques Publiques*, RGPP), launched in 2007. The RGPP aimed to conduct a comprehensive assessment of all public policies and administrative structures to identify inefficiencies and areas for cost reduction (Bezes, 2010). The review process involved extensive consultations and evaluations, leading to a series of recommendations for streamlining public services and reducing administrative overhead. The RGPP resulted in the consolidation of numerous administrative entities, the reduction of redundant functions, and the introduction of performance-based management practices. It also led to the reorganization of government ministries and agencies to enhance coordination and efficiency. The implementation of RGPP was accompanied by significant workforce reductions, with a policy of not replacing one out of every two retiring civil servants (Bezes, 2010). Sarkozy's reforms included significant changes to the budgetary process, aimed at improving financial discipline and transparency. The introduction of multi-year budgetary frameworks was intended to provide greater predictability and control over public spending. This approach allowed for better planning and allocation of resources, aligning budgetary decisions with strategic policy priorities. Additionally, the reforms emphasized performance-based budgeting, where funding allocations were linked to measurable outcomes and performance indicators. This shift aimed to enhance accountability and ensure that public funds were used effectively to achieve desired results. Ministries and agencies were required to set clear objectives and report on their performance, fostering a culture of results-oriented management within the civil service. A key aspect of Sarkozy's civil service reforms was the overhaul of human resource management practices. The reforms sought to introduce greater flexibility and adaptability in the management of civil servants. This included measures to increase mobility within the civil service, allowing

employees to move more easily between different positions and departments (Rouban, 2009).

The reforms also introduced performance-based evaluation and remuneration systems. Civil servants were increasingly assessed based on their performance, and pay scales were adjusted to reward high performers and incentivize productivity. These changes aimed to align the civil service more closely with private sector practices, fostering a culture of competition. The RGPP and associated measures led to significant workforce reductions and a decrease in administrative overhead. According to government reports, the reforms resulted in budgetary savings, contributing to efforts to control public spending and reduce the deficit (Bezes, 2009).

The global financial crisis of 2008 had a dual effect on this political program of state reform. In the short term, it has led Nicolas Sarkozy to temper his criticism of the state, which had regained full legitimacy as a central player in the eyes of public opinion at a time of market turmoil. But at the same time, the economic downturn led to increased pressure on public finances, necessitating measures to control budget deficits and public debt. France, like many other countries, faced the challenge of maintaining public services while implementing fiscal austerity (Clift, 2018). This led Nicolas Sarkozy to allow a bailout of the banks, while at the same time speeding up the pressure on government budgets to prevent a slide in public finances, which eventually took place all the same (Woll, 2008). Hence a mixed feeling in public opinion during this period: that of seeing a diminished State and public services in retreat throughout the country, which nevertheless has no hesitation in financing the private sector to the tune of billions of euros, while the money spent on public policies is the subject of increasing attention.

Overall, the impact of NPM reforms on service quality and accountability has been mixed. On the one hand, performance-based management and decentralization improved responsiveness and accountability by empowering local authorities and service providers. Citizens have more opportunities to engage with local decision-makers and hold them accountable for service delivery (Eymeri-Douzans & Pierre, 2011). The introduction of market mechanisms, performance-based management, and managerial autonomy led to

some improvements in resource allocation and service delivery. For instance, competitive tendering and outsourcing reduced costs in certain areas, while performance-based budgeting helped to align spending with strategic priorities (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011).

On the other hand, the emphasis on performance targets and cost-cutting has sometimes led to a narrow focus on quantifiable outputs at the expense of broader social outcomes. There have been concerns about the quality of services, particularly in areas where privatization and outsourcing have led to fragmentation and variability in standards. Additionally, the proliferation of agencies and autonomous bodies has raised questions about accountability and coordination within the public sector. There were also concerns about the potential for perverse incentives, where the focus on performance targets could lead to unintended consequences, such as gaming the system or neglecting non-measurable aspects of public service and increase the perception of a weakened government (Bezes & Jeannot, 2016). Besides, the efficiency gains were often uneven and varied across different sectors and regions. In some cases, the pursuit of cost savings led to unintended consequences, such as reduced service quality and increased administrative complexity. While these reforms aimed to enhance the efficiency and responsiveness of the civil service, they also contributed to a culture of managerialism that often conflicted with traditional public service values. The emphasis on cost-cutting and performance targets often led to increased workloads, job insecurity, and a perceived decline in the quality of public services.

However, the emphasis on cost-cutting and workforce reductions also raised concerns about the potential impact on the quality of public services. The reduction in staff numbers and the pressure to achieve performance targets has led to increased workloads and stress, even bitterness for remaining civil servants, potentially undermining the effectiveness of public administration (Rouban, 2007). The policy of not replacing one out of every two retiring civil servants led to concerns about workforce depletion and the loss of institutional knowledge and expertise. This was particularly problematic in sectors where specialized skills and experience were critical for the delivery of public services (Bezes, 2009). The decentralization and local government reforms aimed to enhance the autonomy and responsiveness of regional

and local authorities. By devolving more powers and responsibilities, the reforms sought to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of local public services. However, the success of these reforms depended on the capacity of local governments to manage their new responsibilities effectively. The decentralization process was uneven and faced challenges related to coordination and resource allocation, local administrators having been particularly affected by mergers and downsizing of public services (Bezes & Jeannot, 2016). There were also concerns about disparities in the capacity and resources of different local authorities, which could lead to variations in the quality of public services across regions.

The Macron years

The election of Emmanuel Macron as the President of France in 2017 prolonged this trend in the reform agenda towards the modernization of the French civil service. Macron's reforms have sought to profoundly modify the professional world of civil servants, moving away from the traditional "public law/Republican ideology" philosophy and towards a more market-oriented "private law/individual" approach (Rouban, 2013). This shift was in line with the reforms undertaken in most other European countries, as France has sought to join the "club of NPM European countries". Civil service reforms have been presented as a way to enhance efficiency, flexibility, and responsiveness in public administration while addressing fiscal challenges and adapting to a rapidly changing global environment. One of the primary goals of Macron's reforms has been to reduce the cost of the French civil service, which has historically been one of the largest in Europe. His administration, yet largely dominated by senior civil servants — of whom the President himself is a pure incarnation — aimed to reduce public spending and improve the efficiency of the public sector to create a more dynamic and competitive economy.

One of the central initiatives of Macron's civil service reform agenda was the Public Transformation Plan, also known as Action Publique 2022, launched in October 2017. The plan aimed to modernize public administration, improve service quality, and achieve budgetary savings of €60 billion by 2022 with several objectives: sim-

plification and digitalization, performance-based management practices, workforce reduction and mobility, and devolution of more powers and responsibilities to regional and local authorities, enhancing their autonomy and capacity to deliver public services. Macron's announcement of the closure and replacement of the ENA was part of a broader effort to democratize access to the senior civil service and diversify its social composition after the Yellow Vest crisis in 2018 (Eymeri-Douzans, 2022). The new Institut National du Service Public (INSP), aims to provide more inclusive and practical training, with a focus on leadership, innovation, and public service values. The reform of ENA was motivated by concerns that the institution had become too elitist and disconnected from the realities of contemporary public administration. By replacing ENA with INSP, Macron sought to create a more open and meritocratic pathway to the senior civil service, promoting diversity and social mobility. The government first reported progress in achieving budgetary targets and improving service quality, although the full impact of the reforms has not fully materialized yet. However, the focus on cost-cutting and efficiency also fueled the historical concerns about the impact on the quality of public services. Ensuring that cost savings do not come at the expense of service quality remains a key challenge for the reform agenda. Especially, workforce reductions and increased workloads have led to a decline in service standards and increased stress for senior civil servants (Eymeri-Douzans, 2019). Also, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a deterioration in public finances and an explosion in France's deficits and debt, accentuated by a generous policy of having the State cover private sector salaries that could not be paid during the confinement period. This has led to economic pressure to step up systemic reforms of the public service in order to rebalance public accounts. The management of the health crisis has also seen a resurgence in criticism of the centralization of decision-making and the Jacobinism of the State. On the left of the political spectrum, this was accompanied by a general criticism of the government's neo-liberal policies, which were accused of having left public hospitals, symbols of the welfare state and public service, in a state of excessive deprivation. After the end of the crisis, Macron's civil service reforms have therefore faced significant opposition from various quarters. Trade unions, in particular, have

been vocal in their criticism, arguing that the reforms threaten job security, working conditions, and the quality of public services (Dufresne & Pernot, 2020). This condemnation was particularly strong on the occasion of the pension reform decided by the President after his re-election in 2022.

Furthermore, since his first election in 2017, Macron has been accused by critics of favoring political allies and loyalists in key public service appointments. These allegations suggest a potential shift towards a spoils system, undermining the traditional meritocratic principles of the French civil service. This criticism is not new, and forms of politicization in the senior civil service have always existed to generate loyalty and control the administration politically through discretionary appointments (Bezes & Le Lidec, 2007). In practice, several hundred senior positions (ambassadors, prefects, directors of national agencies or major public establishments, general secretaries of ministerial departments, etc.) have always been appointed by the executive on a discretionary basis. Yet the Macron presidency has strengthened the centralization of appointments in the hands of the President and the Secretary General of the Presidency, with ministers having to obtain approval from the presidential cabinet for any appointment, reinforcing criticism of a senior administration brought to heel by the Elysée. Even if the initial ambition announced by Emmanuel Macron in 2017 to place under control all heads of administration who were not in line with the ‘new political world’ he represented was never ultimately instated, appointments have at least tended to reinforce the traditional forms of classic ‘functional politicization’ of the higher public administration (Mayntz & Derlien, 1989, Eymeri-Douzans, 2022).

This pressure on senior civil servants to be politically compliant is also partly due to the reform aimed at ‘opening up’ the senior administration ‘to talented people from other backgrounds’, introduced by the law of 6 August 2019 on the transformation of the civil service (Eymeri-Douzans, 2021). This new provision aimed at allowing the recruitment of contract agents in positions previously reserved for statutory senior civil servants, putting an end to ENA’s monopoly on the latter, for limited terms, suggests an increased politicization. The possibility to appoint personalities loyal to the political power, where until now statutory protection vis-à-vis the political power dominated,

marks a shift. The will to abolish the Grand Corps de l'Etat expressed in 2018, after the transformation of the ENA into the INSP, and President Macron's obsession with undermining the protected status of senior civil servants, also reflect a desire for political power to take control. The National Rally's criticism of Emmanuel Macron for fast-tracking nominations during the July 2024 general election campaign demonstrated that these issues, long removed from public concern, are now fully part of the political debate. More generally, the presidentialization of political practice under Emmanuel Macron, unprecedented since Nicolas Sarkozy, has had the consequence of placing the administration under the thumb of the executive. The evolution of the role of the Secretary General of the Elysée and the staffs of the presidential cabinet towards greater importance in presidential decision-making has worked against the administration and its autonomy (Martigny & Peters, 2024).

The erosion of public trust

In the last decades, a significant shift on the issue of public services has been the fact that it has become a central topic in the French political debate, with a strong influence on political dynamics and voter behavior. From the 1990s onwards, criticism of France's administrative elites began to emerge, fueled by the inadequacies of their control. The ENA, the symbol of the senior civil service, came to illustrate the danger of technocracy. The more technocratic political action becomes, the more the elites are made up of experts, the more difficult it becomes for citizens to exercise control (Eymeri-Douzans, 2013). To this criticism of technocracy has been added another, even more symbolic and highly political: that of the decline of the State and public services, synonymous with both national decline and new inequalities between large urban centers covered by numerous and efficient public services and rural or peripheral areas abandoned by public action (Guilluy, 2016, Fourquet, 2019). The beginning of the perception that the State and civil service have become phantomatic traces back to the famous words of the then Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in 1999, who declared that "we must not expect everything from the State". The accelerated implementation of the NPM reforms after Nicolas Sar-

kozy's election in 2007 reinforced the feeling of a perceived decline of the French civil service, which went along with the erosion of public trust.

Public perceptions of bureaucracy, inefficiency, and lack of responsiveness have led to a decline in confidence in government institutions (Rosanvallon, 2008). High-profile scandals, perceived corruption, and the failure to address pressing social issues have further undermined public trust in the civil service. The decentralization of administrative functions and the emphasis on managerial autonomy have sometimes led to fragmentation and inequality in public service delivery. Different regions and departments may have varying levels of resources and capacity, leading to disparities in the quality and accessibility of services. This fragmentation can undermine the principle of equal access to public services for all citizens, contributing to social and regional inequalities. The impact of the reforms on equity and social cohesion has been a subject of debate. Decentralization and marketization have introduced greater diversity and variability in service delivery, raising concerns about inequality and access to services. Different regions and municipalities may have varying capacities and resources, leading to disparities in service quality and availability. Moreover, the emphasis on efficiency and cost-cutting has sometimes conflicted with the principles of equity and social justice. There have been instances where vulnerable and marginalized populations have faced barriers to accessing essential services, exacerbating social and territorial inequalities. Besides, civil servants themselves have faced significant challenges and disenchantment. Job cuts, restructuring, and increased workloads have led to lower morale and job satisfaction among them. The pressure to meet performance targets and adapt to new management practices has sometimes resulted in a stressful and demanding work environment. Additionally, the recruitment and retention of talented individuals has become more difficult, as the civil service is no longer seen as an attractive and stable career option.

The Yellow Vest (Gilets Jaunes) movement in 2018, epitomized the public backlash against Macron's reforms and disillusioned perception of the civil service. Initially triggered by a proposed fuel tax increase, the movement quickly expanded to encompass broader grievances related to economic inequality, declining public services, and the elite

system (Chamorel, 2019, Hayat, 2022). The Yellow Vests' demands included increased investment in public services, higher wages, and more direct democracy, reflecting deep-seated frustrations with the government's neoliberal policies. Many of their demands were directly related to the decline of public services. They highlighted issues such as the closure of local hospitals, schools, and post offices, which they saw as symbols of the state's retreat from its responsibilities. The movement underscored the frustration of citizens who felt abandoned by a State that was increasingly seen as catering to urban elites and multinational corporations. The Macron administration has especially been accused of being overly sensitive to the interests of the private sector and insufficiently to those of the civil service. The political platforms of both the left and the far right in the 2022 presidential elections and the 2022 and 2024 legislative elections have largely focused on this theme, and on the diversion of the general interest in favor of private interests. This narrative had the effect of fostering a discourse of lament on the decline of France, but also of fueling social anger against the elites accused of betraying the national interest.

The debate over public services has fueled support for anti-system parties, particularly the National Rally (Rassemblement National, RN). The RN has effectively capitalized on discontentment with public service cutbacks, positioning itself as a defender of the welfare state and national sovereignty (Ivaldi, 2018). Marine Le Pen's rhetoric has focused on the need to protect public services from globalization and immigration, resonating with voters who feel left behind by Macron's reforms. Social and cultural factors, particularly issues related to national identity and immigration, intersect with perceptions of public service decline. The RN has linked the deterioration of public services to immigration, arguing that resources are being diverted to support immigrants at the expense of native French citizens. It has successfully tapped into regional grievances, positioning itself as the champion of the neglected periphery. For example, regions experiencing higher levels of public service retrenchment, like the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, traditionally supportive of Left-wing parties, have exhibited stronger voting patterns for the RN (Gougou & Persico, 2017). Marine Le Pen has also consistently attacked Emmanuel Macron for undermining the authority of the state: 'As an elected representative of the nation', she

wrote in a letter to the prefects, stating ‘I share the concern, often silent, but still painful, of all those who feel the *sens de l’Etat* and who witness the collapse of the resources, the reputation and, as a consequence, the authority of the State.’

Conclusion

The decline of the civil service in France has been driven by a combination of economic crises, neoliberal reforms, European integration, and globalization. The administrative reforms and the implementation of New Public Management in the French civil service since the 1990s have brought about significant changes in public administration. Driven by economic crises, fiscal pressures, and neoliberal ideologies, these reforms aimed to enhance efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness by adopting private sector management practices.

While the reforms have achieved some improvements in efficiency and resource allocation, they have also introduced challenges related to service quality, workforce pressures, equity, and accountability. These factors have led to significant challenges, including the erosion of public trust and fragmentation in service delivery.

These policies, the effects of which are still being measured and which do not prevent new reforms, are now at the center of the political debate. The executive is under fire from opponents on both the left and the far right, who accuse it of abandoning the State to private interests, either by pandering to lobbies or by causing a decline in public services. The decline of the ‘sense of State’, far from being anecdotal, is accelerating support for the *Rassemblement National*. It also demonstrates the extent to which the aspiration for an efficient and fair state, combined with nostalgia for the Golden Age of public service, has contributed to the creation of a *phantom of the State* whose political importance is inversely proportional to its actual decline.

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11

New Zealand's public service

**Continuity and resilience in the context
of constitutional, economic, and
administrative reform**

JONATHAN BOSTON

Introduction

SEVERAL PROPOSITIONS have inspired this book.¹ They include the claim that the “Golden Age” of the public service in leading liberal democracies, such as Canada and the United States, has passed, and the related claims that there has been a decline in the central role of the public service in governing, with greater politicisation and less public respect. Such trends have, in turn, undermined recruitment and retention. In short, it is argued, the public service in various liberal democracies is now less influential in governance, less trusted by the public, and a less attractive place to work. The questions of whether, to what extent, and where in the democratic world such propositions hold true lie at the heart of this volume.

Given that context, this chapter assesses the evolution of the public service in New Zealand² since the landmark economic, administrative, and constitutional reforms of the 1980s and 1990s and discusses the country’s comparative experience. The argument, in brief, is that the core conventions, principles, and values of the Westminster system of government have remained broadly intact, at least to date. These include the doctrines of collective and individual ministerial responsibility, and a commitment to a meritocratic, non-partisan public service dedicated to providing free and frank advice and guided by widely-supported principles and values (e.g. political neutrality, impartiality, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, good stewardship, and a spirit of service to the community). Accordingly, thus far no overt, let alone extensive, politicisation of senior public service positions has occurred. Equally, there has been no fundamental downsizing of the “core” roles and functions of the public sector, no evident loss of bureaucratic effectiveness, no major or sustained loss of public trust and confidence in public services, no significant and sustained reduc-

tion in the advisory role and influence of government officials, and no collapse in the relationship between senior officials and ministers.

To be sure, New Zealand's public service — as in most democracies — faces multiple, and in some cases severe, challenges. These include in no order of importance: growing pressures from populist and illiberal movements, including extensive misinformation and disinformation; significant and persistent fiscal constraints, along with substantial expenditure reductions and efficiency drives; rapid technological innovation; more frequent natural disasters; population ageing; gross income and wealth inequalities; and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, despite these challenges the public service is not in crisis.³ It has not lost its way. In most, but not all, respects, the record over recent decades reflects continuity rather than discontinuity, and incremental change rather than drastic upheavals.⁴

A word about terminology: in New Zealand the “civil service” is referred to as the “public service”. Also, a distinction is commonly drawn between the “public service” (or “core public service”) and the “public sector”. The former comprises a sub-set of the public sector. In August 2024 this consisted of 33 government departments, seven departmental agencies, and four interdepartmental executive boards.⁵ The wider public sector embraces several thousand Crown entities (e.g. schools, tertiary institutions, and research organizations), about a dozen state-owned enterprises, and several mixed-ownership companies. Additionally, there are various non-public service departments, several legislative bodies, and three Officers of Parliament. In late 2023, about 16 percent of public sector employees worked in the public service.⁶

The risks to public service values

Among Westminster-type democracies, New Zealand might have been expected to be at risk over recent decades of witnessing a diminution in the role, influence, and public standing of the public service. There are four grounds for such expectations: the energetic embrace of economic liberalism (variously referred to as market liberalism, economic rationalism, and neo-liberalism) between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s; the related whole-hearted endorsement of the

key doctrines of the new public management (NPM); the introduction of proportional representation in 1996; and the country's distinctive and highly flexible constitutional arrangements.⁷

In brief, both major political parties — Labour and National — vigorously embraced economic liberalism towards the end of the 20th century and rejected the previously statist, protectionist, corporatist, and solidaristic policies of the immediate post-war era.⁸ Accordingly, the values of fiscal discipline, economic efficiency, value-for-money, and entrepreneurial endeavour became dominant, together with a policy preference for market mechanisms, private ownership, light-handed regulation, trade liberalisation, contestability and contracting out, and user-pays for many publicly-provided services.⁹ Other things being equal, this significant philosophical shift would have been expected to reduce the overall size of the public sector and its role in the economy. And, indeed, between the mid-1980s and late 1990s there was an ambitious privatization programme, along with the contracting out of previously publicly-managed activities.¹⁰

Likewise, New Zealand embraced NPM more comprehensively and fervently than most other liberal democracies.¹¹ This included support for the main doctrines of managerialism (e.g. 'letting the managers manage' and 'managing for results'), public choice (e.g. the assumptions of rationality and self-interest, and concerns about bureaucratic 'capture'), and the theoretical underpinnings of neo-institutionalism, such as agency theory and transaction cost analysis. In practical terms, NPM resulted in major institutional reforms, including the separation of advisory, regulatory and delivery functions and the splitting of funding, purchasing, and service provision. Contractualist modes of governance were applied to a multiplicity of interpersonal and inter-agency relationships (e.g. via statements of intent, performance agreements, etc.). There were also substantial public finance reforms and a radical devolution of human resource management to individual departments and agencies through the State Sector Act (1988), thereby ending three generations of a unified career service with common occupational classifications, common service-wide salary scales, and a lifelong career.

NPM resulted in several reforms that could have threatened the non-partisan character of the public service. Specifically, the process

for appointing departmental chief executives (CEs) (previously called “permanent heads”) was significantly modified by the State Sector Act.¹² Under the new arrangements, ministers could reject the advice of the State Services Commissioner and make their own appointments — presumably of people suitably aligned to the government. But any such appointments had to be publicly notified and thus politically accountable. Equally important, CEs were placed on renewable, fixed-term contracts and were subject to more demanding accountability, with specific performance requirements (via annual performance agreements with their ministers), regular central agency monitoring, and stronger financial incentives. Aside from this, many previous departmental functions were transferred to non-departmental bodies (i.e. “Crown entities”) governed by politically-appointed boards.

Such changes had the potential — and indeed were partly designed — to enhance political control over the public service and increase officials’ responsiveness to ministerial priorities. Yet there was also a risk that officials would be less willing to offer free and frank advice, more reluctant to promote the long-term public interest, and more accommodating of political imperatives.

The introduction of proportional representation in 1996 and the corresponding likelihood of multiparty parliaments and coalition governments might also have been expected to affect the constitutional position, policy influence, and public standing of the public service.¹³ For instance, based on overseas experience, it was anticipated that inter-party negotiations following each general election would determine the priorities and policy direction of a new government — and do so largely without formal advice from government officials. Also, it was expected that proportional representation would increase the number and influence of political advisers and encourage some senior officials to become more overtly aligned with the interests of one or other of the parties in a coalition government. These changes, in turn, ran the risk of reducing public trust and confidence in the public service.

Finally, the country has a remarkably flexible constitutional framework. It is one of very few parliamentary democracies without a formal, entrenched, justiciable constitution with the status of supreme law. Equally, it is a highly-centralized unitary state with no upper house. Hence, aside from electoral considerations, governments with

a secure parliamentary majority are essentially unconstrained. Major changes to the constitutional role and policy influence of the public sector are thus easy to enact, at least technically.

What, then, has happened to the public sector since the 1980s?

The changing shape of the public sector

Without doubt, the far-reaching economic and administrative reforms during the final decades of the 20th century — not least the comprehensive corporatization and subsequent privatization of many commercially-oriented state activities — affected the size and role of the state. For instance, central government expenditure as a proportion of GDP fell substantially, from around 40 percent in the early 1990s to about 30 percent a decade later.¹⁴ Subsequently, it has oscillated in response to changing economic conditions globally and locally, the different priorities of centre-left and centre-right governments, and the impact of natural disasters (such as the devastating Canterbury earthquakes, 2010–11) and the COVID-19 pandemic. During the early 2020s, central government expenditure as a proportion of GDP has been in the region of 35–40 percent, driven partly by the impact of the pandemic. If local government expenditure (around 4 percent of GDP) is included, total public expenditure has exceeded 40 percent in recent years. But significantly, the balance of central and local government expenditure has changed only modestly over the post-war period, and total public spending as a proportion of GDP has remained close to the OECD average since the early 2000s.¹⁵ In short, New Zealand has not become an outlier among liberal democracies in relation to public expenditure.

During the late 1980s public sector employment (including local government) was close to 350,000 or about 23 percent of total employment. Again, as might be expected, the reforms (especially privatization) had a notable impact, with public sector employment falling to around 15 percent of total employment in the late 1990s and early 2000s before rising again during the term of the Labour-led government (2017–2023) to almost 19 percent (or about 462,000 in a total workforce of 2.46 million) in the early 2020s. Of these, roughly 88 percent worked in central government and 12 percent in local government.¹⁶ In short, three decades after the major economic and admin-

istrative reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, public sector employment as a share of total employment was only modestly below its previous levels.

Aggregate data, of course, masks significant shifts in employment patterns across the public sector and the composition of the workforce (including ethnicity, gender, permanent versus temporary, full-time versus part-time, etc.). Importantly, employment in the public service (i.e., mostly government departments) fell dramatically in the mid-to-late 1980s and early 1990s, from nearly 90,000 in the mid-1980s to about 35,000 in the early 2000s, before gradually rising again over the subsequent decades to peak at close to 66,000 in December 2023.¹⁷ By contrast, total employment in the education and health sectors, for instance, has continued to rise since the 1980s. This, of course, reflects population trends and changing government priorities. The centre-right coalition which took office in late 2023 is committed to reducing the size of the public service, with departmental staff expected to fall well below 60,000 during the mid-to-late 2020s.

Regarding governmental functions, during the 1980s and 1990s the public sector lost most of its commercially-oriented functions, including those in banking, insurance, telecommunications, tourism, and transportation. But there was no significant or sustained hollowing out of the state. The public sector continued to undertake a multiplicity of activities, especially those often classified as inherently governmental functions.¹⁸ These include the provision of policy advice to ministers, the conduct of diplomacy, the provision of most policing and correction services, the control of the borders, the collection of taxes, the provision of defence and emergency management services, and a vast array of regulatory activities. It also continued to provide a full range of social services, including education, health care, social housing, social work, accident compensation, and disability support.

Overall, employment in the public sector has not become less attractive over recent decades. The devolved nature of human resource management since the late 1980s, together with decentralized wage fixing and the flexibility to employ contractors and consultants, has meant that departments, Crown entities and state-owned enterprises have been able to adjust their remuneration arrangements and employment levels, subject to budgetary constraints and economic con-

ditions. Recruiting staff for senior roles in government departments and Crown entities has not generally been difficult; nor have there been major problems filling key policy-oriented roles.

That said, New Zealand's weak economic performance (including low productivity growth) relative to its near neighbour Australia (with which it shares an open labour market) has undoubtedly affected recruitment and retention in particular parts of the public sector. In short, remuneration packages have failed to remain competitive with their Australian counterparts. This has been especially evident for many health care professionals and others with significant technical expertise or specialist skills (e.g. experienced staff in the armed forces, police, and prisons). Regional factors have exacerbated the situation: in many small rural communities recruiting and retaining teachers and doctors has long been a challenge. The same applies to seasonal agricultural workers. In such respects, however, New Zealand is not alone.

A high turnover of staff has afflicted certain public sector organizations from time to time.¹⁹ Further, the COVID-19 pandemic had substantial employment impacts in parts of the public sector, not helped by the complete or partial closure of the nation's borders during most of 2020–21. But again, these problems have not been unique to New Zealand.

Public service effectiveness

Assessing the effectiveness of the public service — or the wider public sector — is complicated. There are multiple challenges including data limitations and a host of conceptual, analytical, methodological, and measurement issues. And these apply regardless of whether the unit of analysis is the whole governmental system, specific sectors, individual organizations, or sub-units. All empirically based claims, therefore, must be treated with caution.

Nevertheless, drawing on the available comparative evidence, New Zealand's public service and its various component parts appear to perform tolerably well by international standards. Take, for instance, the findings of the International Civil Service Effectiveness (INCISE) Index developed by the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford and the Institute for Government.²⁰ This includes

comparative data from around 40 countries.²¹ According to the INCISE index, the overall performance of New Zealand's public service was rated second in 2017 (with Canada first) and second in 2019 (with the UK first). More specifically, New Zealand performed above or well above the average across all 12 indicators, with particularly positive results for public service integrity, procurement, policy-making, capabilities, and financial management. Those areas where the country's performance was deemed to be close to, or only slightly above, the average were tax administration, digital services, inclusiveness, and crisis and risk management.

Other international comparisons of the government's effectiveness, such as those undertaken by the OECD, the Chandler Institute for Governance, and the European Institute of Public Administration, also cast New Zealand's public service in a favourable light.²² Also, in many domains of wellbeing, New Zealand scores above the OECD average.²³

Yet, as elsewhere, government failures — both large and small — remain commonplace.²⁴ Some of these reflect unwise political decisions, including a reluctance by ministers to allocate sufficient funds to deliver their desired outputs and outcomes. Alternatively, governments have pursued multiple ambitious reforms simultaneously, thereby exceeding the capacity of the public service to deliver. The Labour-led government during 2017–23 is a case in point, with its large-scale reforms to health administration, tertiary education, housing and urban development, and resource management. These reforms put huge pressure on parts of the public service — which was simultaneously coping with a pandemic — contributing to lengthy delays, patchy results, and the abandonment of certain proposals, such as a new social insurance scheme. Unsurprisingly, the government was vigorously criticized by opposition parties prior to the 2023 general election for “poor delivery”, very likely contributing to Labour securing barely half the party vote it enjoyed three years earlier.

While ministers can justifiably be held responsible for many poor policy outcomes over recent decades, others can reasonably be sheeted home to indifferent or weak management by government departments and agencies. Examples include huge cost overruns and/or lengthy delays on major projects (e.g. constructing new railway lines and motorways, implementing large-scale computer upgrades, etc.),

poor risk management and serious regulatory failures (e.g. the Cave Creek Disaster, the leaky buildings crisis, and the Pike River mining disaster), and excessive internal restructuring of departments, especially following a change of CE.²⁵ Independent Officers of Parliament, notably the Auditor-General and Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, have repeatedly criticized government departments and agencies for the indifferent, if not poor, quality of their performance monitoring and reporting, and the lack of investment in robust policy evaluation.²⁶ Likewise, academic research and investigative journalism have highlighted numerous examples of mediocre organizational leadership, toxic work cultures, inadequate management of conflicts of interest, cronyism, corrupt practices, and a failure to provide adequate protection for whistleblowers.²⁷

Be that as it may, when tested by major exogenous shocks — whether natural disasters, terrorist attacks, or the COVID-19 pandemic — New Zealand's public service has generally risen to the challenge. Moreover, the country has not lacked such shocks. They include: several highly damaging earthquakes (e.g. in 2010–11 near Christchurch and 2016 near Kaikōura); repeated large-scale floods, with 17 separate states of emergency declared in 2023 due to severe weather events; a deadly attack on two Mosques in Christchurch in March 2019 killing 51 worshippers and injuring numerous others; and a volcanic eruption on an offshore island in December 2019 resulting in 22 deaths and multiple injuries.

Unquestionably, COVID-19 posed severe governance, policy, and administrative challenges. In this regard, New Zealand's pandemic response, based on multiple criteria, was among the most effective globally, particularly during the early years. For instance, New Zealand was one of only seven countries which experienced fewer deaths during 2020 and 2021 than expected given previous trends (i.e. the combined all-age excess mortality rate during these years was negative).²⁸ Similarly, a remarkable array of economic and social policy initiatives were designed and implemented during 2020–21, often at extraordinary speed.²⁹ Collectively, these were highly effective in protecting public health, regulating international travel, minimizing unemployment, and avoiding greater material hardship. In part, these results reflected the strong political leadership and superb communication skills of the

then Prime Minister, Dame Jacinda Ardern,³⁰ along with high public compliance with COVID-related regulations. But it was also a tribute to the capable leadership, coordination, innovation, and flexibility of the public service and the wider public sector. A National Crisis Management Centre oversaw the all-of-government response during the early months of the pandemic, large numbers of public sector organizations and their staff pivoted swiftly to work on COVID-related issues, and all the initiatives undertaken via the COVID Response and Recovery Fund were transacted through normal budgetary processes, thus eschewing emergency powers under the Public Finance Act.³¹

With little doubt the organizational and staffing flexibility witnessed by the public sector during the early 2020s was facilitated by the NPM reforms several decades earlier, along with subsequent efforts to enhance inter-agency cooperation and collaboration.³² That said, as in many other liberal democracies, New Zealand's public service was poorly prepared for COVID-19 and, as highlighted by the Auditor-General, John Ryan, the pandemic revealed significant deficiencies in the country's emergency management systems.³³ Further, the government hoped in late 2021 — erroneously as it turned out — that it could defeat the Omicron variant through an extended lock-down. As matters transpired, its efforts sparked increasing public criticism and open resistance, culminating in February 2022 in a protracted occupation of Parliament's grounds and surrounding streets by thousands of protesters. Civil disobedience of this magnitude and intensity has rarely occurred in New Zealand. The nature of the occupation, together with its violent ending, undermined the previously high public support the Labour-led government.

Public trust and confidence

By international standards, New Zealand has mostly enjoyed above average levels of trust in, and satisfaction with, the institutions of government, not least the public service. According to an OECD survey in 2022, 68 percent of citizens were satisfied with administrative services (above the OECD average of 63 percent).³⁴ While satisfaction with the education system and the judiciary were slightly above the OECD average, satisfaction with the health care system was somewhat below. Simi-

larly, 55 percent of New Zealanders in 2022 expressed high or moderately high trust in the civil service compared to the OECD average of 50 percent, with trust in Parliament (47 percent) being 8 percent above the OECD average.³⁵ Local surveys, such as Kiwis Count, have also reported significant levels of trust over many years by New Zealanders in public services based on their own personal experience (i.e. generally between 75-85 percent).³⁶ Interestingly, citizens typically report a higher trust in the public service than the private sector,³⁷ with older citizens displaying higher levels of trust in public institutions than those under 25.³⁸ Also, the evidence suggests that trust in the public service is generally independent of levels of support for the government, with citizens influenced by their access to public services, the reliability of these services, and considerations of fairness and integrity.

Favourable results have also been evident over many years from other surveys — both local and international — covering similar and related topics (e.g. corruption perceptions, the quality of democracy, political rights, civil liberties, etc.). Invariably, New Zealand figures among the best performing liberal democracies.³⁹ In 2022, for instance, the country was rated second (behind Norway) in the democracy index produced by the Economist Intelligence Unit,⁴⁰ second equal with Finland (behind Denmark) in Transparency International's corruption perception index,⁴¹ and fourth in the index of public integrity (behind Denmark, Norway, and Finland) produced by the European Research Centre for Anti-Corruption and State-Building.⁴² Likewise, New Zealand was rated fourth in 2022 for strong institutions and fifth for leadership and foresight in the Chandler Good Government Index.⁴³

High trust in public institutions probably contributes to a greater willingness by citizens to comply with government regulations, thereby enhancing policy effectiveness. Survey evidence indicates that those with higher trust, for example, were more likely to support the COVID-19 vaccination campaign and get vaccinated themselves.⁴⁴ Equally, the Government Statistician, Mark Sowden, told Parliament in April 2024 that a key reason for an unwillingness to complete its surveys in recent years, including the 2023 census, is 'anti-government sentiment'.⁴⁵ Hence, despite a national trust and confidence marketing campaign prior to the census designed to counter disinformation and elicit support, the number of citizens refusing to cooperate more than

tripled between the 2018 census and the one five years later.⁴⁶ Likewise, STATS NZ reports that more citizens are wary of sharing their personal information with government departments and agencies because of concerns about how it might be used. Any significant escalation of such suspicions, perhaps due to AI-generated deep fakes and misinformation on social media, risks undermining the quality of government statistics and public services.

Various other factors also pose a threat to public trust in governmental institutions. These include a decline in investigative journalism, weak regulation of lobbying, an increased use of urgency in parliamentary processes, and inadequate constraints on the roles which high-ranking officials and politicians can undertake immediately after leaving office.⁴⁷

Politicisation

As noted, the NPM reforms and the subsequent introduction of proportional representation raised the possibility of the public service becoming more politicised. This included a risk that ministers would reject the advice of the State Services Commissioner (now the Public Service Commissioner) regarding the appointment of departmental CES and select their own favoured candidates — whether based on considerations of ideology, policy orientation, or personal compatibility. Alternatively, Commissioners might be selected who were likely to recommend the appointment of politically aligned candidates. Either way, given the role of CES as the employer of their staff, political appointments might then occur at lower levels within departments. Such developments would not only undermine the provision of free and frank advice, but also create administrative instability whenever governments changed.

There was a related concern: even without overt political appointments, public servants might increasingly tailor their advice to suit the partisan interests of the government (or individual parties within a coalition), thus compromising their ability to serve governments of different political persuasions with equal loyalty and dedication.⁴⁸ In particular, the move to renewable, fixed-term appointments for all senior departmental officials in the late 1980s, and the related reduc-

tion in job security, was thought likely to make public servants less willing to contest ministerial decisions on matters of professional principle, such as accuracy, reliability, objectivity or fairness. Departmental CES seeking reappointment for a further term, for example, would have an incentive to play safe and, wherever possible, avoid challenging, let alone embarrassing, their minister. In short, the nature of the 'public service bargain' would be fundamentally altered,⁴⁹ with the public service becoming more compliant, less independent, and more politically slanted. Over time, this would reduce public trust and confidence in the public service, lower governmental effectiveness, and threaten the long-term public interest.

Such concerns were not without foundation. New Zealand officials and politicians were keenly aware of developments during the late 20th and early 21st centuries in other Westminster systems, notably Australia and Canada, including the increasing tendency for several departmental heads to be replaced after a change of government with people aligned to the new administration.⁵⁰ Additionally, the growth in the number and influence of political advisers in ministerial offices in various countries was well known,⁵¹ as was the propensity for dominant prime ministers to bypass well-established cabinet procedures and ignore civil service advice.⁵²

To date, however, New Zealand's public service has not been *overtly* politicised. With very few exceptions, governments of both the centre-left and centre-right have accepted Commissioners' advice regarding CE appointments.⁵³ To be sure, self-denying ordinances have applied: candidates considered clearly unacceptable to the government have generally not been recommended for appointment; equally, those disinclined to serve a particular government have not applied, have not sought reappointment or, in a few cases, have resigned before their contract expired. Also, ministers can certainly make it difficult for a CE in whom they lack confidence to be reappointed.

That said, ministers don't simply get the CES they want and any attempts to influence appointments at a lower level — which would be illegal — are normally strongly rebuffed. To date, no significant turnover of CE positions has followed a change in the composition of the governing parties (unlike the situation in some other parliamentary democracies). Significantly, too, few CES have been politically active

after leaving their departmental roles (e.g. by standing for election to Parliament). For such reasons, at least regarding senior appointments, New Zealand's public service is generally perceived to be politically neutral (i.e. in the sense of being non-partisan) and any "political governance", as the late Peter Aucoin called it, appears less pronounced than in other Westminster-type democracies.⁵⁴ Equally, a recent survey of public servants indicated that at least 60 percent of respondents believed that "merit considerations drive appointments in their own organisations".⁵⁵

How might such outcomes be explained? First, the two major political parties have thus far remained firmly committed to a meritocratic, professional public service. Such support has been especially strong among those who have served as prime ministers and in other senior cabinet roles (e.g. Finance and State Services). Plainly, they have perceived such institutional arrangements to be in the public interest, as well as serving their own political goals. Significantly, in this regard, the Labour government's rejection in 1990 of Commissioner Don Hunn's advice to appoint Gerald Hensley as the Secretary of Defence — the only publicly known case of such a rejection — was poorly received politically.⁵⁶ Future governments clearly took note of this reaction.

Second, New Zealand is a small unitary state. Accordingly, the pool of senior executive talent is limited. Also, unlike federal systems, there are no equivalent public services at the sub-national level. In effect, this means that there are few suitable candidates for most senior departmental positions and thus little scope for a revolving door of highly-ranked officials as governments (coalition partners or ministers) come and go. In short, politicization is less practical than in larger, more decentralized democracies.

Third, the NPM reforms retained an independent central agency — the State Services Commission (since 2020 the Public Service Commission) — with responsibilities for the appointment, remuneration, and performance management of departmental CEOs. Undoubtedly, the Commission has been pivotal since the 1980s in safeguarding the country's long-standing constitutional conventions and championing the value of a non-partisan public service. For instance, the then State Services Commissioner, Peter Hughes, was in-

strumental in persuading the Labour-led government to enact the Public Service Act in 2020. A key provision is Section 11:

The public service supports constitutional and democratic government, enables both the current Government and successive governments to develop and implement their policies, delivers high-quality and efficient public services, supports the Government to pursue the long-term public interest, facilitates active citizenship, and acts in accordance with the law.

The Act also specifies five principles in Section 12 that should guide the public service — political neutrality, free and frank advice, merit-based appointments, open government, and stewardship — and five values in Section 16 — impartial, accountable, trustworthy, respectful, and responsive. Equally important, the Act further entrenches the political neutrality of the Commission by requiring the Prime Minister, under Section 42, to consult with the leader of each political party represented in Parliament before making recommendations to the Governor-General on appointments of the Public Service Commissioner and the two Deputy Commissioners.

That said, since the 1990s there have been persistent concerns about whether departments are faithfully fulfilling the convention of free and frank advice.⁵⁷ Assessing such matters is challenging. After all, much advice to ministers is oral. Hence, despite the Official Information Act and the retrospective publication of most departmental advice and cabinet papers, outsiders cannot know all the advice ministers receive — or what has been conveniently withheld or unjustifiably modified. A lack of regular, systematic evaluation of the quality of departmental advice by central agencies compounds the problem of assessment.

Nevertheless, it appears that some departments (e.g. the Treasury) have been more consistent and courageous in ‘speaking truth to power’ than others. Also, the strength of the convention varies depending on the issue, authorising environment, and personalities involved. Further, the Official Information Act remains an important safeguard: departments consistently failing to provide objective, im-

partial, and balanced advice risk identification and public shaming. Recent survey evidence indicates that around three-quarters of public servants “believe their organisation’s senior leaders model the principle of free and frank advice”.⁸

But one other matter deserves comment, especially given the anti-government, anti-woke, anti-science backlash evident in various parts of the democratic world. Undoubtedly, there is a public perception that government officials in New Zealand are disproportionately left-leaning, liberally minded, and environmentally oriented. In recent general elections, for instance, the main centre-left political parties have won a much larger share of the party vote in Wellington — the capital city — than centre-right parties, and in 2023 two central city electorates were won by the Green party. Such outcomes have fuelled concerns that the public service is out of touch with wider public opinion and hostile to the policy agendas of right-leaning parties. As has happened elsewhere, such concerns could prompt more vigorous and concerted moves by a future government to reform and downsize the public service, politicize the top-tier of appointees, and reduce independent oversight. In the meantime, it will be important for public sector leaders to demonstrate their commitment to serving governments of all political persuasions faithfully and effectively, while also defending the need for sound, evidence-based policies and the convention of free and frank advice.

Policy influence

Governments constantly receive vast amounts of advice on thousands of issues. Determining who influenced which decisions, to what extent, and why is anything but straightforward.⁹ Nevertheless, regarding the public service several matters are clear.

First, with one exception (2020–23) there has been no single-party majority government since the mid-1990s. All governments, therefore, have needed to negotiate coalition and/or support arrangements following an election — unlike the situation prior to proportional representation. Although departmental officials are able, if requested, to supply information and analysis to coalition negotiators, they are barred from making policy recommendations. Moreover, departmen-

tal input is not always sought or may be limited to a few issues. For such reasons, since the mid-1990s the public service has been less able to influence the initial policy direction, priorities and commitments of an incoming government.

Second, as in other Westminster systems, the number of non-governmental sources of policy advice has grown over recent decades, with the establishment of new think tanks, the expansion of consulting firms, and a stronger network of civil society organizations and business lobby groups. New Zealand has also witnessed a revitalized and more influential Indigenous community. Inevitably, therefore, public service advice has become more contested.

Third, in contrast to several Westminster systems, there has been no substantial expansion in the number of political advisers in ministerial offices or a dramatic increase in the role of the Prime Minister's Office.⁶⁰ Nor have there been persistent efforts by prime ministers or other senior ministers to circumvent the role of the public service by relying heavily on external experts and consultants. For instance, with few exceptions, departmental officials have continued to serve in ministerial offices in the executive wing of Parliament. Moreover, in many policy areas (e.g. foreign affairs, defence, domestic security, fiscal management, etc.) much of the relevant technical and analytical expertise resides within the public sector. In those areas, therefore, government officials continue to exert a disproportionate influence on policy-making.

Nonetheless, the policy capability of, and the quality of advice provided by, various government departments, has generated ongoing concerns, and prompted several concerted responses.⁶¹ And there has been much criticism over recent decades regarding the extent to which some departments rely upon consultants — and are perhaps unduly influenced by their views. The advisory picture, in other words, is complex, variegated and evolving.

Conclusion

Since the 1980s, New Zealand's public service, like its democratic counterparts elsewhere, has been affected by powerful ideological currents, significant administrative reforms, major policy shifts, and profound technological advances. But despite this, the constitutional

conventions, principles, and values underpinning the country's public service have proved broadly resilient, with no overt politicisation of senior departmental roles and no fundamental or enduring changes to the advisory role and policy influence of the public service. Likewise, there is no evidence of a major or persistent loss of public trust in the institutions of government or a systematic decline in governmental effectiveness. Mercifully, too, the country has thus far escaped multiple, serious and shameful administrative scandals. For such reasons, New Zealand's experience appears somewhat unusual, at least when compared with Australia, Britain, and Canada. Why might this be so?

Presumably, the answer lies in a combination of path dependency, a robust political culture, prudent governmental leadership, well-designed legislation, and good luck. For one thing, unlike a growing number of liberal democracies, New Zealand has thus far escaped severe political polarisation, autocratic and dishonest leaders, rogue billionaires, or separatist movements that can cause serious ethical tensions and conflicting loyalties for government officials, especially at senior levels. For another, the country has avoided a major constitutional, fiscal, or economic debacles such as Brexit, rapid and destabilizing changes of prime ministers, as in Australia and Britain, or a 'plutocratic quasi-coup', as in the US.

To be sure, proportional representation has reshaped the composition of Parliament and altered the dynamics of government formation and coalition management. But it has also tended — at least prior to the 2023 general election — to reduce policy extremism and constrain constitutional experimentation, with both major parties seeking the support of median voters. Thus far, too, New Zealand has mostly dodged populist anti-state and anti-bureaucracy social movements. Consequently, there have been fewer challenges to existing constitutional arrangements, democratic institutions, and long-established administrative values. Instead, despite multiple exogenous shocks, such as COVID-19, the country has remained a highly functional and well-ordered democracy.

Related to this, the leadership of the major parties and the public service have stayed firmly committed to time-honoured constitutional conventions and administrative arrangements, as reflected in broad

cross-party support for the Public Service Act's key provisions. Aside from this, various other factors have influenced the constitutional role, integrity, and relative stability of the public sector. In no order of importance they include: the absence of a highly partisan media; the behavioural constraints imposed by the Official Information Act; a relatively robust cabinet decision-making system with a network of standing committees frequently attended by officials; the small and relatively intimate character of the country's policy community; the centralized and unitary nature of the state and hence the lack of alternative (and perhaps politically-aligned) administrative elites at the sub-national level; the comparatively low level of political and bureaucratic corruption, assisted by relatively transparent campaign finance rules; and only limited cases of ministers egregiously pushing the boundaries of constitutional norms, international and domestic law, or ministerial codes.⁶²

None of this seeks to downplay the ongoing, if not increasingly serious, global threats to democratic governance, from which New Zealand will not be immune. All governments, and those officials who advise them or deliver public services on their behalf, will face formidable, indeed unprecedented, challenges — geopolitical, demographic, climatic, ecological, and technological — over coming decades. Whether democratic processes and institutions, together with a meritocratic, effective, and non-corrupt public service, can survive these challenges is not a foregone conclusion. New Zealand has been relatively fortunate to date. That good fortune may not last.

NOTES

1. Acknowledgements: I am very grateful to the editors and to Chris Eichbaum, Derek Gill, Kathy Hall, Peter Hughes, David King, Michael Macaulay, Rodney Scott, and Sally Washington for their assistance in preparing this chapter.
2. New Zealand is increasingly being referred to locally as Aotearoa New Zealand. Aotearoa in te reo Māori means “long white cloud” or “long bright world”, and is the name given to the islands of New Zealand by the Indigenous people. For the purposes of this chapter, I will employ the English name.
3. For an overview of the challenges facing New Zealand’s public service in New Zealand see, for instance: Bill Ryan and Derek Gill, eds., *Future State: Directions for Public Management in New Zealand* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2012); Sonia Mazey and Jeremy Richardson, eds., *Policy-making under Pressure: rethinking the policy process in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2021); Peter Hughes and Rodney Scott, ‘High Autonomy, High Alignment: Coordinating a more unified public service’, in Sonia Mazey and Jeremy Richardson, eds, *Policy-making under Pressure: rethinking the policy process in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2021), 170–179.
4. For a more critical perspective on the longer-term impacts of the managerialist reforms of the 1980s, see: Simon Chapple, ‘From Mandarin to Valet Public Service? State sector reform and problems of managerialism in the New Zealand public sector’, *Policy Quarterly*, 5, 4 (2019), 49–56.
5. For details see: <https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/system/central-government-organisations>
6. For details see: <https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/research-and-data/workforce-data-public-sector-composition/workforce-data-workforce-size>
7. For a recent analysis of New Zealand’s constitutional arrangements, see: Matthew Palmer and Dean Knight, *The Constitution of New Zealand: A Contextual Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).
8. For different perspectives on New Zealand’s economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s see: Alan Bollard, *New Zealand: Economic Reforms, 1984–91* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1992), and Jane Kelsey, *The New Zealand Experiment* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1995).
9. Alan Bollard, *New Zealand: Economic Reforms, 1984–91* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1992).
10. See, for instance, Ian Duncan and Alan Bollard, *Corporatisation and Privatisation: Lessons from New Zealand* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1992).
11. See, for instance, Jonathan Boston, John Martin, June Pallot and Pat Walsh., *Public Management: The New Zealand Model* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1996); Derek Gill, ed., *The Iron Cage Recreated: The Performance Management of State Organisations in New Zealand* (Wellington: Institute of Policy Studies, 2011); Martin Lodge and Derek Gill, ‘Towards a new era of administrative reform? The myth of post-NPM in New Zealand’, *Governance*, 24, 1 (2011), 141–166; Mark Prebble, *With Respect: Parliamentarians, officials, and judges too* (Wellington: Institute of Policy Studies, 2010); Alan Schick, *The Spirit of Reform* (Wellington: State Services Commission, 1996); Graham Scott, *Public Management in New Zealand, Lessons and Challenges* (Wellington: New Zealand Business Roundtable, 2001); Rodney Scott, Flavia Donadelli,

- and Eleanor Merton, 'Administrative philosophies in the discourse and decisions of the New Zealand public service: is post-New Public Management still a myth?' *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 89, 4 (2023), 941–957; Rodney Scott and Peter Hughes, *Contemporary Public Administration in New Zealand: Stories, Culture, Values* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, forthcoming 2025).
12. Jonathan Boston, John Martin, June Pallot, and Pat Walsh, *Public Management: The New Zealand Model* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1996), 98–120; Richard Norman, *Obedient Servants? Management Freedoms and Accountabilities in the New Zealand Public Sector* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2003).
13. Jonathan Boston, *Governing Under Proportional Representation: Lessons from Europe* (Wellington: Institute of Policy Studies, 1998).
14. Norman Gemmell and Derek Gill, 'The myth of the shrinking state? What does the data show about the size of the state in New Zealand 1900–2015', *Policy Quarterly*, 13, 3 (2016), 2–10.
15. See OECD, *Government at a Glance 2023* (Paris: OECD, 2023).
16. <https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/research-and-data/workforce-data-public-sector-composition/workforce-data-workforce-size>
17. <https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/100-years-of-Public-Service.pdf>; <https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/research-and-data/workforce-data-public-sector-composition/workforce-data-workforce-size>
18. Jonathan Boston, 'Inherently governmental functions and the limits to contracting out', in Jonathan Boston, ed., *The State Under Contract* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1995).
19. Simon Chapple, 'From Mandarin to Valet Public Service?', p.54.
20. See: <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/about/partnerships/international-civil-service-effectiveness-index-2019>
21. The INCISE assessment framework (which, at the time of writing, was being refreshed) comprises 12 functions and attributes (collectively referred to as indicators) that affect the effectiveness of the public service. Each indicator is based on a series of metrics (in some cases a dozen or more), drawing on multiple international and national surveys and other evidence. Note that these metrics focus on the activities and conduct of central governments; they exclude the performance of sub-national governments.
22. See, for instance: <https://www.oecd.org/publication/government-at-a-glance/2023/dashboard>; <file:///C:/Users/jonat/Downloads/Public-Sector-Performance-Programme-2022-2025-an-International-Benchmarking-Study.pdf>; <https://chandlergovernmentindex.com/overview/>
23. See: <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/new-zealand/>
24. See, for instance: Sonia Mazey and Jeremy Richardson, 'Governments stuff up all the time: why expect Aotearoa New Zealand to be different?', in Sonia Mazey and Jeremy Richardson, eds., *Policy-making under Pressure: Rethinking the policy process in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2021), 21–39.

25. See, for instance: Simon Chapple, 'From Mandarin to Valet Public Service?'; Robert Gregory, 'Political Responsibility for Bureaucratic Incompetence: Tragedy at Cave Creek', *Public Administration*, 76, 3 (1998), 519–538; Richard Norman and Derek Gill, 'Restructuring: An Over-used Lever for Change in New Zealand's State Sector?' in Bill Ryan and Derek Gill, eds., *Future State: Directions for Public Management in New Zealand* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2011), 262–278.
26. See, for instance: the Controller and Auditor-General, *The problems, progress, and potential of performance reporting* (Wellington: Controller and Auditor-General, 2021); Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, *Environmental reporting, research and investment: Do we know if we're making a difference?* (Wellington: Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, 2022).
27. See, for instance: Michael Macaulay, 'Towards a New Public Ethics', *Policy Quarterly*, 16, 1 (2020), 77–82; Michael Macaulay, 'Whistling in the Dark? Is the Protected Disclosure Act 2022 a form of placebo policy?' *Policy Quarterly*, 19, 4 (2023), 46–52.
28. See, for instance: GBD 2020 Demographics Collaborators, 'Global age-sex-specific mortality, life expectancy, and population estimates in 204 countries and territories and 811 subnational locations, 1950–2021, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic: a comprehensive demographic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2021', *Lancet*, 11 March 2024, <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736percent2824percent2900476-8>
29. Controller and Auditor General, 'Co-ordination of the all-of-government response to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020', December 2022, <https://oag.parliament.nz/2022/covid-19/docs/all-of-govt-response-to-covid.pdf>; see also <https://chandlergovernmentindex.com/wp-content/uploads/CGGI-2022-Report.pdf>
30. See, for instance: Montgomery Van Wart, Michael Macaulay, and Katie Haberstroh, 'Jacinda Ardern's compassionate leadership: a case of social change leadership in action', *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 35, 6 (2022), 641–58.
31. See: <https://www.transparency.org.nz/blog/budgeting-in-a-time-of-covid-a-crisis-is-not-an-excuse-for-lack-of-transparency>
32. Rodney Scott, Flavia Donadelli, and Eleanor Merton, 'Administrative philosophies in the discourse and decisions of the New Zealand public service: is post-New Public Management still a myth?' *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 89, 4 (2023), 941–957.
33. Controller and Auditor General, *Co-ordination of the all-of-government response to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020*, (Wellington: Controller and Auditor-General, December 2022), <https://oag.parliament.nz/2022/covid-19/docs/all-of-govt-response-to-covid.pdf>; see also <https://chandlergovernmentindex.com/wp-content/uploads/CGGI-2022-Report.pdf>
34. See: <https://www.oecd.org/publication/government-at-a-glance/2023/country-notes/new-zealand-c9e6e96e#chapter-d1e22>
35. Ibid.
36. See: <https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/research-and-data/kiwis-count>
37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. For details results, see: <https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/research-and-data/trust-in-the-public-service>

40. See: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/democracy-index-eiu?tab=table>

41. See: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022>

42. See: <https://corruptionrisk.org/ipi-ranking/>

43. See: <https://chandlergovernmentindex.com/wp-content/uploads/CGGI-2022-Report.pdf>

44. See Simon Chapple and Kate Prickett, 'Research Note: Trust in government and COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy', *Policy Quarterly*, 17, 3 (2021), 69–71.

45. See: <https://newsroom.co.nz/2024/04/11/lack-of-trust-in-govt-drives-hard-refusals-to-census/#:~:text=While percent20Stats percent20NZ percent20had percent20a,of percent20the percent20Covid percent20D19 percent20pandemic.>

46. Ibid.

47. See, for instance, Stephanie Worboys, 'Eroding trust: how democratic deficits have undermined the public's confidence', *Policy Quarterly*, 20, 3 (2024), 20–25; Philippa Yasbek, *Shining a Light: Improving transparency in New Zealand's political and governance systems* (Auckland: Helen Clark Foundation, 2024).

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49. See: Christopher Hood and Martin Lodge, *The Politics of Public Service Bargains: Reward, Competency, Loyalty — and Blame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

50. See, for instance: Peter Aucoin, 'New Political Governance in Westminster Systems: Impartial Public Administration and Management Performance at Risk', *Governance*, 25, 2 (2012), 177–199; Jacques Bourgault and James Iain Gow, 'Canada's top public servants meet agency theory in the Harper years (2006–2015)', *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 88, 2 (2020); Richard Mulgan, 'Politicisation of Senior Appointments in the Australian Public Service', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 57, 3 (1998), 3–15; Donald J. Savoie, *Breaking the Bargain: Public Servants, Ministers, and Parliament* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Patrick Weller, 'Politicisation in the Australian Public Service', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 48, 4 (1989), 389–81.

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52. Richard Mulgan, 'Truth in government and the politicization of public service advice', *Public Administration*, 85, 3 (2007), 569–586

53. See: Jonathan Boston, 'New Zealand: 'cautionary tale or shining example'?' in R.A.W. Rhodes and Patrick Weller, eds., *The Changing World of Top Officials* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001), 189–228; Jonathan Boston and John Halligan, 'Political management and new political governance: Reconciling political responsiveness and neutral competence', in Herman Bakvis and Mark D. Jarvis, eds., *From New Public Management to New Political Governance* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2012), 204–241.
54. Peter Aucoin, 'New Political Governance in Westminster Systems: Impartial Public Administration and Management Performance at Risk', *Governance*, 25, 2 (2012), 177–199.
55. See: Richard Shaw and Chris Eichbaum, 'Politicisation in the New Zealand public service', *Public Sector*, 46, 2 (2023), 3–7.
56. Jonathan Boston, 'New Zealand: 'cautionary tale or shining example'?' in R.A.W. Rhodes and Patrick Weller, eds., *The Changing World of Top Officials* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001), 202.
57. For various perspectives see: Richard Shaw and Chris Eichbaum, 'Politicisation in the New Zealand public service', *Public Sector*, 46, 2 (2023), 3–7; Andrew Kibblewhite and Peter Boshier, 'Free and frank advice and the Official Information Act: Balancing competing principles of good government', *Policy Quarterly*, 14, 2 (2018), 3–9; John Martin, 'Round Table on 'Free and Frank Advice': Summary of Discussion', *Policy Quarterly*, 8, 4 (2012), 11–15; Richard Mulgan, 'What Future for Free and Frank Advice?' *Policy Quarterly*, 8, 4 (2012), 3–10.
58. Richard Shaw and Chris Eichbaum, 'Politicisation in the New Zealand public service', *Public Sector*, 46, 2 (2023), 3–7.
59. Jonathan Craft and John Halligan, *Advising governments in the Westminster tradition: Policy advisory systems in Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
60. For a comparative analysis, see Chris Eichbaum and Richard Shaw, eds., *Partisan appointees and public servants: An international analysis of the role of the political adviser* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2010).
61. See, for instance: Sally Washington and Michael Mintrom, 'Strengthening policy capability: New Zealand's Policy Project', *Policy Design and Practice*, 1, 1 (2018), 30–46; Sally Washington, 'An infrastructure for building policy capability — lessons from practice', *Policy Design and Practice*, 6, 3 (2023), 283–298; Sally Washington, 'New Zealand's reforms to improve policymaking', London, Institute for Government, 2016, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/new-zealands-reforms-improve-policymaking>
62. That said, there is no shortage of concerns. See: Philippa Yasbek, *Shining a Light: Improving transparency in New Zealand's political and governance systems* (Auckland: Helen Clark Foundation, 2024).

12

From mission to management

**The rise and fall of the European
public service spirit, or how NPM
reforms challenge the legitimization
of public staff**

DIDIER GEORGAKAKIS

Should the Commission be an administration de mission, which charts new directions and projects in European integration? Or simply an administration de gestion, which simply manages the policy agenda collectively chosen for the EU by its member states?

— John Peterson, paper for the EUSA, Los Angeles, April 2009

Ita misse est

— English translation: “This is the end of the service”

THE EUROPEAN ADMINISTRATION presents a compelling case for questioning the decline of the public service. In essence, the existence of a public service at the service of the European institutions, its Member States and their citizens has long been regarded as “wishful thinking” (Coombes 1970) rather than a tangible reality. Nevertheless, following a 70-year historical process, a European public service has been established that is autonomous of the Member States of the European Union. It comprises approximately 40,000 staff, who hold the status of civil servants for life, thereby ensuring their independence from both the Member States and the economic interests that are particularly prevalent within the European institutions.

In comparison to other public services, the European civil service possesses a number of distinctive characteristics. The European civil service is relatively small in size, with a total of approximately 40,000 staff, which is 100 times smaller than the French civil service despite the European Union having a population that is eight times larger. It is transnational and includes staff from all member states, including those who have left (UK) or are only affiliated (Norway). It is common to the various European organisations, with the statutory staff of the Commission, the Parliament, the Council, the courts and other bodies all being covered by the same Staff Regulations. Beyond each

organisation, the service is dedicated to the European institutions as a whole, with a particular focus on the preparation of consensus powering the EU common policies. It should be noted that not all staff are directly involved in this policy-making process, as there are numerous service functions (translation, finance and budget, human resources, communications, etc.). However, the primary function of the service is to work for the convergence of interests and to integrate them into a broader common European interest. The implementation of these common policies is primarily the responsibility of the Member States or agencies.

Having outlined these particularities, it is evident that the European public service, like all other public services, has been affected by the global phenomenon of New Public Management reform, which has occurred at different rates, in different forms and with varying effects between the 1980s and 2010 (Hood & Peters, 2004). A significant series of administrative reforms, which simultaneously affected the Staff Regulations of the European civil service and the functioning of the largest organisation and new inter-institutional bodies (such as the Recruitment Office, for example), took place between 2000 and 2005.

The results of these reforms have been studied in numerous academic papers, which suggest that a nuanced assessment should be made (Kassim 2008; Bauer, 2008; Ellinas & Suleiman 2008; Ban 2013). To summarize, the number of staff has been contained but not reduced. While the number of contract staff is increasing in comparison to that employed under the Staff Regulations, this increase has not resulted in a reduction in overall personnel numbers. Furthermore, the financial rules on decentralization and human resources have had a varied and somewhat contradictory impact. Consequently, they are being subjected to a comprehensive review. While the reform led to improvements in training and the fight against gender inequality in careers, the reform (which was based on very Anglo-Saxon NPM cultural codes and was therefore very different from the previous model) had an important cultural effect that demoralised many staff for a time (especially those from the South), while simultaneously insisting on the day-to-day management and delivery rather than to the mission of building Europe.

The aim of this paper is not to glorify a golden age or to suggest that the European institutions' civil service is in irretrievable decline as such. However, we would like to address the question of the rise and fall of public services in relation to one of the effects of these reforms that has not been adequately addressed within the existing literature. The paper defends the proposition that, by addressing what are typically regarded as secondary cultural dimensions, the reform has in fact called into question an essential symbolic dimension, namely a legitimisation that may be described as quasi-sacred (or "laic in appearance" as Merton already observed in his seminal work) on which this public service and its "spirit" had been built. The hypothesis is that the symbolic authority that had been built up over 50 years of the public service's history and that consisted in the embodiment of the service to Europe as a mission of building a new prosperous and peaceful continent has been severely undermined in favour of the more conformist, and above all more banal (client-oriented instead of mission-oriented) values of international management. To put it another way, the reformers have "misdiagnosed the patient" (Savoie, Peters 1994) on two occasions. They have imported managerial reforms that have already been rightly criticised into a very specific transnational administrative context, which is primarily concerned with agendas and decisions rather than "gestion". By rationalising to the extreme, they have severely undermined the enchantment of the European service's mission, which was at the heart of its cohesion and effectiveness.

From this standpoint, this paper will address a point that extends beyond the framework of the European Union. In addition to considerations such as staff numbers, status, and rules, it can be argued that administrative reforms can have unintended symbolic effects that are crucial to staff authority and sense of belonging, and, more generally, to the ability of public services to accomplish their mission of common good. Transforming public services into customer services is a transformation that is much more than a change of word or idea. Beyond the scope of ideological debates, the paper posits that the delegitimisation of the sense of mission affects the very basis of the authority and commitment of public service employees as servants of a higher entity. The case of the EU is thus relevant to other cases in order to grasp the full extent of the decline of the public service. While

not all aspects of public service have declined, this dimension of embodying the spirit of the common good (in the French sense of the *intérêt général*) as an issue in itself has been severely jeopardised.

To illustrate this, the paper begins by describing the socio-historical construction of the European civil service. It then proceeds to examine how its common spirit and authority were built and reproduced. Finally, it analyses how the New Public Management reform of the 2000s jeopardised this process.

Unlikely but actual: the genesis of a European (institutions') public service

First, it is necessary to recall a few elements of the history and more general sociology of the European civil service and of politics, in the broadest sense of the term, which were at the root of its formation and evolution¹.

The European Union is not the result of a linear invention that began with Robert Schuman's speech on 9 May 1950. Rather, it is the outcome of a complex process of monopolisation of common affairs by a bureaucratic centre that either attracted, dissolved or pushed aside the other organisations that were created after the war around different definitions of Europe and its missions. Between the end of the Second World War and the 1960s, European issues were addressed by a vast network of organisations, including the Council of Europe (established in 1949), the Western Union (created in 1948 and transformed into the Western European Union in 1954), and the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (established in 1948, which became the OECD in 1961). In 1948, the European Economic Cooperation (which became the OECD in 1961) was established, followed by the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1952, Euratom in 1957, and the European Economic Community in 1957. Additionally, numerous international institutions were linked to these European organisations, having been established earlier. While the Communities were conceived of as administrations, many of the other organisations were built more as places for intergovernmental planning and coordination than as entities in charge of public policies (on

the model of the ECSC). This approach had the effect of not making their staff a central issue and giving rise to a wide variety of statuses.

In 1952, the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe called for the creation of a “genuine European civil service, the administrative basis of the future institutions of a united Europe”. In response, the Council of Europe established a working group comprising all the aforementioned institutions (in addition to NATO, CERN and the Upper Rhine Conference) with the objective of exploring the potential for establishing a “body of European civil servants common to all the institutions”. However, discussions continued for fifteen years within groups of varying status (working groups, consultative committees, etc.) without reaching a conclusion.

The ECSC, whose more technocratic origins are well documented, took a different route and played a decisive role in the creation of a European civil service. Although there is every reason to believe that there were discussions on the subject when the treaty was being negotiated, nothing was a foregone conclusion. When the ECSC was established, there was a vigorous debate as to whether its structure should mirror that of a cartel’s board of directors or that of a government. If the latter option was selected, it did not necessitate the existence of a statutory civil service. It is also necessary to challenge the commonly held belief within European institutions that Jean Monnet epitomised French technocracy and that he “logically” led Europe to adopt a model similar to that of the ENA (the French National School of Administration), which was established during the Liberation. In fact, Monnet was an autodidact, a former cognac merchant, and he was initially sceptical of the value of a permanent and autonomous European civil service and of any bureaucratic model. These are rather those opposing Monnet’s power who were instrumental in the formation of the civil service. They included High Authority members seeking to limit Monnet’s personal authority over appointments, academic experts and “entrepreneurs of state” seeing Europe as a federation in the making, and those in managerial roles facing practical problems, such as contract drafting, remuneration, and function accumulation. Nevertheless, the foundation of an autonomous civil service was established in two key areas. The first was an explicit comparison with the state (and not international) civil service. The second was a form

that was sufficiently flexible to be capable of becoming the framework for “the future European federal state”.

The creation of the EEC and Euratom in 1957, and above all the merger of the executives of the three communities, which was formalised in the treaty signed in April 1965 and implemented in July 1967, represented a further pivotal moment in European civil service policy. The merger was the source of the critical mass that would create a disproportion between the merged unit and the other administrations in charge of European issues (such as the Council of Europe or the WEU). Once again, no decisions had been made regarding the civil service when the EEC and Euratom were created. Furthermore, France had not been in favour of the new organisations replicating what existed at the ECSC. However, the playing field was now different. The ECSC has a statutory civil service, and the Court of Justice, now responsible for administration, was common to the merged institutions. The joint parliamentary assembly was also in favour, as was the Bundestag, which expressed the need for a common framework for the European civil service. Finally, unlike Monnet, the first President of the EEC Commission, Walter Hallstein, was banking on a Fredrich II-style bureaucracy *par excellence*, led by competent lawyers and which influenced Max Weber’s ideal of bureaucratic authority.

The merger resulted in a new set of Staff Regulations for 5,000 officials, a major break with the largely contractual employment base of other international or European organizations. Unlike the staff of most other international organizations, the European civil service has since enjoyed a particularly solid legal base in internal administrative law, regularly updated and reinforced by the European Court of Justice. This legal basis is also supported by a solid sociological basis (the two are mutually reinforcing). This sociological basis has been historically consolidated thanks to the example set by managers (some of them have become veritable role models, Seidel 2010) over many years and the action of the staff unions, which have been deeply involved in defining the material (salaries, benefits, jurisprudence) and symbolic resources (mottos, legitimation, etc.) of the Group. The unions have thus accompanied the institution in the process of establishing the group’s legitimacy as a “permanent, competent and independent”

vanguard, a formula that has become their watchword in the defense of the European public service. It's important to note that this vanguard mission of European construction goes beyond post-war reconstruction to include a more transcendent dimension of European salvation, which is regularly reactivated during the crises of the European Union.

A status group dedicated to the mission of constructing Europe or the formation and reproduction of a spirit

It is necessary to define more precisely the collective dimension of the European civil service body. This is particularly the case in regard to the formation of a common culture and a European spirit of service which could be considered as its reputation and a specific form of legitimation.

A significant number of scholars have concentrated their attention on the divisions that exist among EU civil servants. These include differences in nationality, cultural gaps, sectorial, ideological, and organisational differences and oppositions. It is evident that these differences exist, and it would be illogical to portray EU civil servants as a uniform body. Nevertheless, EU civil servants also exist historically and socially as a unified body, and more specifically, as a "status group" (in the Weberian sense of a Stand, that is to say a group whose leading social and power position is guaranteed by law). Indeed, the appointment of one of the 40,000 permanent civil servants of the EU institutions has significant implications for the objective social position and symbolic authority of these agents, both individually and collectively. Despite their internal differences, this social style, as well as their guaranteed permanence in the field, is (or was) at the heart of their distinctiveness in relation to the other groups involved in this field.

In its historical form, the staff policy was characterised by weakness (Stevens 2001). However, there was a policy of *habitus*, that is to say, work carried out implicitly by EU institutions concerning the bodies and minds of their staff, which contributed to the formation of an "esprit de corps" (Seidel 2010). As one official observed, "For a considerable period, there was no necessity to expend resources on 'team building' initiatives, as there was already a functioning team in place."

This statement is not a nostalgic or critical reflection on the latest changes. This representation reflects the notion of a “body” supported by deep foundations. It is crucial to resist the temptation to portray these individuals as solely employees of an organisation. Additionally, they are part of a collective dedicated to the service of Europe, which transcends the limitations of a mere occupation. The process of entering and serving in EU institutions is not simply a matter of obtaining a job. It has the capacity to transform individuals by giving them a number of crucial material resources, including the provision of a lifetime’s salary that is comfortable and secure, as well as the accumulation of multicultural skills and the establishment of valuable networks. Furthermore, it confers a specific symbolic authority, reputation, and prestige (at least within the inner circles of the EU institutions) that are related to their capacity to embody European institutions and interests. This capacity is the result of a process that begins with a university education and is completed and consecrated by an independent selection process (thereafter, the *concours* to take the French name that prevailed) and the subsequent recruitment process. Furthermore, throughout the various stages of their careers as European civil servants, they are positioned at a distance from other agents of the EU institutional field (i.e., Member state diplomats or officials, interest representatives, etc.).

Among these filters, the *concours* represents a particularly effective means of understanding the underlying issues. The open competition to access a position as a permanent European civil servant was a significant factor in the production and reproduction of the group and its spirit, particularly in a context where it is more challenging to control more conventional social institutions (family and school) which generally play a role in the formation of elites. The most prestigious *concours*, which provide access to careers in public administration, law, and economics, have been pivotal in shaping the trajectory of European institutions. However, they are not the most numerous, given the impressive growth of ad hoc, specialised selective examinations. These include legal counsellors and linguists, IT engineers, administrators, researchers, public health specialists, and others. The format of the selective examination has evolved over time, and it should be noted that the interpretation grids may vary according to

the jury. However, it is notable that European officials are the only agents who are appointed on the basis of a specific European selective examination or open competition, namely the EU concours.

The concours may be considered a “rite of institution” (Bourdieu, 1994), which has significant implications for the definition of this group and its members. Thus far, the examination has primarily served to identify individuals with a specific set of skills, encompassing both academic and social competencies, that are particularly suited to the European context. The European general knowledge section was eliminated during the 1990s in favour of standardised verbal and digital reasoning tests (MCQs) and, for administrators, dissertations focusing primarily on European subjects (treaties, status, European policies and their instruments, etc.). The final oral examination was designed not only to serve as a means of corroborating the preceding sections of the examination, but also to assess the capacity to work in a multicultural environment, as described in the calls for candidacy. It can be reasonably assumed that an agent who is overly reliant on the reproduction of his national stereotype will have limited success in passing the oral examination before a jury comprising officials of other nationalities. The oral examination also ensures that the future “chosen ones” possess a number of fundamental dispositions (the capacity to listen, the ability to verbalise knowledge when analysing problems, the ability to work and live in a context of expatriation, as well as the ability to distance themselves from national stereotypes, etc.). These dispositions will enable them to evolve sustainably within European institutions or to represent these institutions in the outside world. Consequently, they readily embody the institution they represent, at least until they reach the “glass ceiling,” the point at which further promotion necessitates political, and particularly national, support.

This process distinguishes European officials from their national counterparts (by celebrating the European adventure, multicultural and multilingual diversity, and more prosaically, the capacity to work quickly and autonomously) and other expatriates, with whom they share a social identity but differ in their commitment to public service and the common good. This process is replicated through other forms of consecration throughout their careers, which in turn affects the type of career paths they pursue. The case of the Director-Generals

(DG) of the European Commission, the position situated at the apex of the EC administrative hierarchy, provides a useful illustration of this phenomenon. The analysis of 200 DG's career trajectories demonstrates that the proportion of in-house careers having held positions in Commissioners' cabinets instead of ministers' private offices at the national level, having been members of a commissioner's Cabinet of a different nationality, holding international degrees, or being recognised for their European dimension, has increased over time (Georgakakis, 2010, 2017). In other words, this has an effect that extends far beyond discourses on the idea of Europe. It generates mental maps that EU officials have of their careers, trajectories and bodies.

To some extent, it can be argued that the formation of this transnational body of people dedicated to building Europe exhibited some cultural traits comparable to a quasi-religious sense of purpose. This is not to suggest that civil servants were unquestioning supporters of European integration, as their opponents have claimed. It is evident that they were considerably more pragmatic in their approach and only a minority of them openly espouse a federalist agenda. Nevertheless, they were tasked with fulfilling the prophecy of the founding fathers (Schuman, Gasperi, Adenauer), whom the eminent historian Millward refers to as the "saints and prophets," and with attaining the "goods of salvation" as said Max Weber, including European prosperity and peace. The Christian network's influence within the European political landscape undoubtedly contributed to the formation of these cultural foundations (Kaiser 2007). In any case, the agenda was long-term and quasi-atemporal in comparison to the agendas of member states' politics. Many of the managers derived their authority from their "charisma of function,"² which served the institution and the European way of life in the making.

This definition reached its zenith during Jacques Delors' tenure as President of the European Commission between 1985 and 1989. As a practising Catholic, he was one of those who took the concept of "functional charisma" the furthest, in the sense of embodying the institutions and the mission of building Europe's common future.

The reform: the importation and delegitimation effects of management

This vision of a golden age must be qualified. As has been previously stated, this spirit was not universally embraced. The process of institutionalising the civil service was not without its challenges. The merger, which was the subject of intense debate between 1962 and 1967, and the subsequent enlargements, which began with the inclusion of Great Britain, Denmark and Ireland in the mid-1960s and were completed in 1972, also served to exacerbate existing tensions. It was therefore necessary to create space for new members and to plan new releases, in particular for new arrivals. There was a cultural divide between the northern and southern regions, which became more pronounced with the 1995 enlargement, which included Sweden, Finland and Austria. The prospective enlargement planned for 2004 prompted a multitude of interrogations. However, the most significant factor was the budgetary constraints of the post-Delors period and the resignation of J. Santer in 1999, which was attributed to a situation of general mismanagement.

The resignation of the first Commissioner in the history of the College of Commissioners in 1999 has had a significant impact on the long-term process, as it pertains to the eruption of management within the Commission. The introduction of managerial practices into the European Commission can be traced back to the 1970s, although the major waves of New Public Management (NPM) had until then been contained outside the institutions. Following the resignation of the Santer Commission, the eruption of managerial practices within the European Commission gained particular momentum. This has been identified as a pivotal moment in the history of the institution, and even a Reform in the plain and historical meaning of the term, marking a significant shift in the prevailing cultural and quasi-religious regime of legitimation.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to address some legitimate potential objections. Firstly, it is evident that the impact of managerial practices on the European Commission is contingent upon the duration of their implementation. It is not a straightforward process whereby managerial practices are introduced and then automatically

change the rules and practices of the Commission. It is evident that the effects of the reform are diverse in nature. In this analysis, we will focus on a single type of effect. Moreover, as has been observed by numerous commentators, the Kinnock Reform, from the name of the British European commissioner who drove it, comprised a series of distinct reforms (Staff regulation, management by objectives, budget, Human resources, etc.), implemented in a gradual manner. Consequently, it is more accurate to refer to the Kinnock Reforms in the plural. Nevertheless, a number of consequences of these reforms led to a process of rationalisation, which involved changes to the forms and rituals of consecration as well as the legitimacy practices. The objective of this study is to demonstrate that these changes represent a significant contributing factor to the disillusionment observed by Bauer (2008) and Ellinas and Suleiman (2008). This disillusionment is not merely a matter of discourse; rather, it is a consequence of the implementation of these reforms, which have had a tangible impact on the conduct of public officials. This can be illustrated by several aspects of the administrative reforms, but for the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on two in particular.

The first aspect is, in fact, the last one in the reform's chronology. Nevertheless, it is arguably the first in terms of its impact on the future of administrative careers, namely the concours, the open competition for entering the European Institutions as an official government employee. One of the objectives of the Kinnock White Paper was to establish a novel organisational framework for the selection of personnel. This objective was driven by a number of historical and sociological factors. Indeed, prior to the resignation of Santer's College during a previous attempt at reform, several significant issues had arisen with the organisation of the 1998 open competition for staff selection. The establishment of the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO) has led to the reform of the concours in several stages (Ban, 2009). Although the latest reform is still too recent to be studied in terms of its results, its goals and measures are emblematic of the changing consecration process. The title chosen by Carolyn Ban for her article, one of the few studies on this reform, is significant: "Moving the sacred cow out of the road." The strength of this title lies in its ability to illustrate the profound embeddedness of the concours in the culture of

the organisation, and to demonstrate that the mere removal of the consecration dimension of the concours is a mere technicality.

The rhetoric of reform is of interest in itself, as it illustrates the practices that founded the legitimacy of the selection procedures. The general culture, knowledge and, in this case, the European culture, were central elements that gave the laureates a distinctive reason to be proud of their success and their status of “Stand” as we saw. In numerous interviews conducted, respondents referred to their oral examination as a debate on European integration or policies. They described how they engaged in a rigorous yet intellectually stimulating debate with members of the jury. This exemplifies the elite’s legitimacy through culture, which is consistently placed at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of symbolic values. The introduction of the reformed concours represents a radical change. In a message promoting a conference on EU concours in London in March 2010, EPSO wrote: “We will also provide information about our new selection procedures for graduate entrants.” In 2010, the EU-knowledge testing approach was replaced by a competency-based model, which was deemed necessary to identify candidates with the requisite abilities and potential to contribute to the development of modern Europe (UACES email list, March 2010).

Whatever the intentions may be, it is likely that a significant proportion of these new forms are an attempt to address practical issues such as the number of candidates and litigation. However, it is also probable that another part is more ideological in nature (Ban, 2009). These new forms, therefore, break with the established order in several respects. Firstly, it is necessary to examine the manner in which the selection process is currently conducted, as well as its symbolic significance. The initial stage, which comprises computer-based testing, encompasses three examinations: verbal and numerical reasoning (resembling the GMAT test), abstract reasoning (comparable to the IQ test), and situational tests. These are individual tests conducted independently, with participants facing a computer in a cubicle within an assessment centre where they are situated alongside individuals with no connection to the European servant community (private sector recruitment, national bureaucrats, etc.). This represents a radical departure from the previous situation, which involved a large hall

(resembling the Heysel Stadium in Belgium) with a “cathedral atmosphere” (as one interviewee described it), with thousands of individuals present for the same reason, sharing similar concerns (the overwhelming majority of whom discussed the impressive and intimidating environment of the previous first stage of recruitment). Furthermore, the exercise was characterised by a high degree of ritualisation. This included the process of locating one’s seat, maintaining silence, awaiting the arrival of all participants, awaiting the distribution of the subject, maintaining silence once more, observing the opening of the envelope by the organisers and the subsequent distribution of the exam to thousands of tables and individuals, maintaining silence once more, being permitted to take one’s pencil, and so forth. It is evident that not all individuals adhered to this established ritual, yet it was incorporated into the collective consciousness and, to some extent, reflected in other processes of staff selection. The concours was similarly organised in a symbolic manner, with the tests commencing in collective areas before candidates were invited to individual meetings with the institution. For some, this was their inaugural encounter with the institution. In contrast to the previous procedures, the selection process is now conducted in an assessment centre. The candidates are competing directly against each other, and they no longer have the opportunity to interact with the jury, which represents the institution.

Another crucial factor is the temporal aspect. As EPSO emphasises, the new procedure comprises “much quicker competitions with fewer steps in the procedure and an annual cycle of competitions for the most common job profiles.” This new style, inspired by the British “fast stream” approach, is perceived to be more comfortable for candidates and, at the same time, interesting insofar as it breaks the somewhat arbitrary and irregular timing for the selection of administrators into a more routinized annual procedure. Moreover, the duration of the competition was previously a lengthy process, extending up to two years. This was perceived by an interviewed official as being akin to entering a “priestly” vocation. It would be impractical to include in this study the numerous interviews in which former candidates discussed their preparation for the examination and the amount of time they spent on it, both alone and in groups, with or without the support of national “prépas” (intensive preparatory schools). Moreover,

the majority of candidates undertook the examination on multiple occasions, which also served to facilitate socialisation. Once more, the “fast stream” method breaks this long temporality, while allowing the candidate to internalise the values of the European administration (which were central in the multiple-choice questions about European public policies or staff regulation), and at the same time confirming their suitability for the role.

It is challenging to ascertain the extent to which this “anti-elitist” process is likely to transform the socio-morphology of the recruited agents. Nevertheless, the devaluation of consecration through knowledge acquisition renders the recruitment process unlikely to become less elitist. Instead, the type of elite consecrated is merely changing. In point of fact, computer-based testing exercises such as the GMAT and the IQ are, in fact, anything but neutral. These are the very exercises that business school students engage in on a daily basis. Furthermore, the management-based exercises in assessment centres also consecrate skills and role models imported from the international private management sector, which is, in fact, no more neutral. The new method is likely to devalue the role model and skills of the former continental administrative elite in favour of a new international (Anglo-American?) model of an undifferentiated managerial elite. This is more than just a matter of democratising the recruitment process. The new formula of open competition has been successful in targeting agents who are close to the latter model, from business schools rather than schools of public law or public service. This has contributed to the formation of an alternative elite, which is similar to the global class of managers and business elites and more conforms to a global neo-liberalist spirit.

This delegitimisation process is followed by a number of other practices that were central to the European civil servants’ pursuit of nobility. The first practice concerns transparency and accountability. The aforementioned practices have introduced a substantial rupture with the concept of the ‘mystery of state’, as defined by Ernst Kantorowich (1956) and the ‘mysterium of ministerium’ as described by the Scholastics of the Middle Ages. This can be translated as the mystery of office structuring the making of the State and its high-level civil service (Bourdieu/Wacquant). While the charisma of service of some

EU civil servants, particularly the Directors General of the Commission, was regarded as legendary by those within the European Commission, it was carried out in practice without reflexivity, often unspoken but also practised personally in an impersonal context. This is important for understanding the charismatic dimension. The two-fold change introduced by personal responsibility and accountability, through the practice of the annual report, supposes an objective procedure and an annual and bureaucratic public account for the directors general. This contrasts with the magical effect previously obtained by the accomplishment of small miracles, such as bringing to fruition a difficult negotiation, resisting pressure from Member States, ending a long-term conflict, managing to maintain one's position confronted with the EP or the Council, and so forth. The notion of embodying the general interest (as a magical operation) did not necessitate any further form of objective demonstration or traceability.

In a similar vein, the promotion of a new “culture of service,” embodied by codes of conduct published since 2000 in response to corruption concerns surrounding the resignation of the Santer College (Cini 2007), led to unexpected, if not perverse outcomes. The notion that officials are to be held accountable for the quality of their service has been a long-standing tenet of governance. This belief is not only espoused by officials themselves, but also by the general public who interacts with them. However, given that the legal basis of their policies and practices has consistently been a primary concern for policy-makers, the intensifying control of both legality and “morality” that emerged alongside the introduction of new morality policies in the 2000s led to a unique situation where suspicion replaced belief and European enchantment. This general issue could also lead to new insights regarding the practical effects of the introduction of extensive accountability policies.

Conclusion: why the sense of service and mission matter

In conclusion, the case of this reform illustrates one of the paradoxes in the Middle Ages of the NPM (Hood & Peters 2004). In this case, the NPM was introduced at a time when European institutions were seeking to recover from the scandals that had led to the dismissal of

the European Commission for mismanagement. However, the reform introduced a cultural shift that actually undermined the cultural basis of legitimacy through the sense of service and mission that had been patiently built up over the previous decades to found the reputation and legitimacy of the European civil service.

These effects were particularly pronounced at a time when the Commission was politically disoriented in its neo-liberal moment under Barroso and when the referendums on the EU's constitutional treaty were rejected in France and the Netherlands. For an extended period, the Commission experienced a decline in the number of students who felt the vocation to join the institutions, particularly following the Commission's emergence as Europe's budgetary policeman and the armed wing to kneel down Greece.

However, this situation has since undergone a degree of change. Internally, there was a perception that the pendulum had swung too far and that reforming the administrative reform was necessary. Politics also became involved, with a Commission that sought to be more political and less neo-liberal. This was particularly evident after the opening period of the Green Deal, which permitted a sense of mission to be recovered in a way close to a functional equivalent of the Rooseveltian New Deal, which is discussed in greater detail elsewhere in this book. In addition to the European civil service context, this case study serves to illustrate that the public service mission, if secular, is arguably only secular in appearance as said Merton. The legitimacy of the public service is not solely founded on the cold rationality of the bureaucracy, even if it is efficient. Rather, it is the ability of the public service to represent and embody something greater, more generous and more sustainable that underpins its legitimacy. This is why, for those who have to carry it out as well as for those it concerns, the mission of the public service cannot be reduced to simple objectives of management plans.

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NOTES

1. This part is based on references and archival work, details of which can be found in Georgakakis, *European Civil Service* and "Compter la fonction publique européenne".
2. For the record, Max Weber distinguishes between two types of charisma: the charisma of the leader and the charisma of function (or of office), which he uses as examples in the church but also in administration. On these questions, see Weber and Eisenstadt, *On charisma*.

A brief postscript

B. GUY PETERS

THE CIVIL SERVICE is one of the central institutions of government. It provides continuity, expertise, and a commitment to serving the public, and it does so with few accolades from the politicians it serves and generally modest rewards. Despite those virtues, the civil service is often the target of attacks by the media, some academics, and even the public whom it serves. “The Bureaucracy” is always an easy target for politicians who can score political points by promising to reform the institution.

The civil service has survived for decades and has become well-institutionalized in democratic political systems. While it may take somewhat different forms in different countries, most have had the properties of being politically neutral, professional, and skilled both in the procedures and the substance of governing. Again, despite these virtues, the civil service is now under increasing attack in a number of democratic systems, and the chapters in this book demonstrate that some civil services are clearly in decline. The decline of the civil service is manifested in a number of ways. In some cases, it is the loss of confidence by politicians who seek to politicize the public bureaucracy and to install their own political allies in positions that might have been occupied by career civil servants. In others, the decline has been a loss of trust and respect by the public. In still others, what was once a respected and popular career choice for young people has lost that luster, and it becomes difficult for the government to attract the “best and brightest” to join the civil service. These forms of decline are, to some extent, all related and may be mutually reinforcing.

The chapters in this book address the question “What Happened?”, and now the question must become “What Can We Do?” That is, what can be done to restore the civil service, if not to its golden age, at least to an appropriate level of respect and influence. This restoration is important not just for the well-being of current and future civil servants, it is also crucial for the societies within which

they function. Although many may denigrate the civil service, politicians need its expertise and its collective memory to be able to govern effectively, and to prevent repetition of past mistakes (Nagel and Peters, 2020). Citizens also need the career civil service to ensure fairness in the implementation of policies, for the predictability in policy that provides some assurance to the public and for delivering programs and services in an accessible manner to all.

One thing that appears crucial for civil servants to do in order to help restore their status within the public sector, and the society, is to accept that their apolitical stance is no longer as central as it once was. This appears to deny the very nature of the career public service, but it more accurately reflects the politicized nature of the governing institutions within which they now serve. There have been intense pressures in many political systems to functionally politicize, if not formally politicize, the civil service (Hustedt and Salomonsen, 2014, 80). Rather than acting as neutral professionals, expert civil servants increasingly are expected to be committed to the political programs of the government of the day. Their advice is expected to be more attuned to political stances of the government, and they more often now are utilized as spokespersons for the government rather than the *eminences grises* behind the scenes. Having been thrust into this political role largely against their will, civil servants should embrace it and begin to take more overt policy stances. This more active role is especially important when governments have been taken over by illiberal, populist political parties. As Barry Bozeman and others have argued, civil servants failing to act in that setting would amount to their complicity with illiberal governments (Bozeman et al., 2024). More generally, Kutsal Yesilkagit et al. have argued that the civil service has a role to play as the guardians of the state (Yesilkagit et al., 2024). Civil servants do represent the continuity of the State and its institutions, and should assert their understandings of the interest of the State and the society as opposed to the interests of any particular government that happens to be in office.

The notion that civil servants would adopt such political stances is not fanciful. For example, when the Trump administration's civil servants in the Department of State and the Environmental Protection Agency went public with their opposition to certain policies, and a

number resigned from their position (Drezner, 2018). More recently French civil servants were preparing for open resistance had the RN party won the 2024 election (Trippenbach, 2024), and Dutch civil servants protested against the new far-right government in that country. It is a new political environment, and civil services need to carve out a role that speaks to the interest of good government.

As well as taking the overtly political route to attempt to restore their position, civil servants can build alliances with groups in civil society that support them and support good government. For example, in the United States the Volcker alliance and several other organizations have been engaging in campaigns to improve the image of the civil service, and to encourage young people to pursue careers in government. Civil servants in democratic countries also have unions and professional associations that can be used not only to improve pay and working conditions but also to disperse information about the qualities of civil servants, and the rewards of a career in the public sector.

Finally, civil servants can cooperate with their clients in order to promote their interests, and the interest of good governance. Survey evidence in a number of countries demonstrates that a majority of citizens, and in some cases a large majority, have a much better opinion of civil servants than they do of politicians. Likewise, most respondents report that their interactions with civil servants when services are being delivered are positive. These clients are therefore a large reservoir of good will toward the civil service that may be used to improve the general perception of the quality and importance of the civil service.

Some of these perspectives on the role of the civil service may appear to be anti-democratic, and they may be if one conceives of democracy in a simple, majoritarian manner (Peters and Pierre, 2022). In that conception of democracy, a party securing an electoral majority should be able to make policy and should be able to expect the cooperation of the civil service. Liberal democracy, on the other hand, also includes an emphasis on the rule of law and the protection of minority rights. In that conception of democracy, the civil service has an important role to play in protecting the rights of citizens and clients. However, it is necessary to think carefully about how civil servants can play a more visible role in governance and representative

democracy. Politicians and civil servants in Westminster-inspired parliamentary systems will need to address accountability issues.

Much has been said of late about the size of the civil service and inefficient public sector management practices. This inspired New Public Management to be introduced in many countries throughout the Western world. This collection of essays makes the point that New Public Management did not measure up to expectations. Civil servants, better than anyone, know that private sector management practices, for the most part, do not work well in government. Civil services should welcome an open debate about how best to manage government operations and how best to establish the size of government bureaucracy.

This book is an attempt to understand what has happened with the civil service in wealthy democracies, and also to think about the future of that institution. Addressing these two questions is important for the quality of governance provided to citizens, and for the health of democratic institutions. This brief postscript has only begun to explore the second of the two issues raised, but we hope that others will also pursue this question and provide viable answers that will help in the continuing quest for good government.

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About the Authors

Jonathan Boston, ONZM, is Emeritus Professor of Public Policy in the School of Government at Victoria University of Wellington. His research interests include climate change policy, child poverty, anticipatory governance, public management, the funding of tertiary education and research, and welfare state design. He has served at various times as the Director of the Institute of Policy Studies and the Director of the Institute for Governance and Policy Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. Over the course of his career in New Zealand, he has contributed to a wide range of advisory groups and has been employed by several government agencies including the Treasury, the Ministry for the Environment, and the Tertiary Education Commission. He has also served on the boards of various non-governmental organizations, such as Oxfam Aotearoa (2013–22).

Recent books include: *Governing for the Future: Designing Democratic Institutions for a Better Tomorrow* (2016); *Safeguarding the Future: Governing in an Uncertain World* (2017); *Transforming the Welfare State: Towards a New Social Contract* (2019); and *A Radically Different World: Preparing for Climate Change* (2024). He has edited *Policy Quarterly* since 2005.

Ruth Dixon joined the Department of Politics and International Relations at Oxford in 2006 from a background in medical research. She worked there until 2015, co-authoring with Christopher Hood *A Government that Worked Better and Cost Less? Evaluating Three Decades of Reform and Change in UK Central Government* (Oxford University Press 2015) which won the WJM Mackenzie book prize from the UK Political Studies Association and the Louis Brownlow

Book Award from the US National Academy of Public Administration. Until her retirement in 2023, Ruth held research posts at the Blavatnik School of Government and as a parliamentary academic fellow with the House of Lords library.

Didier Georgakakis is a Professor of Political Science and a Jean Monnet Chair at the University of Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne. He is a member of the Centre Européen de Sociologie et de Science Politique (CNRS/PI/EHESS) and a senior member of the Institut Universitaire de France. Additionally, he is a part-time professor at the College of Europe in Bruges, where he chairs the General European Studies program.

Georgakakis has published extensively on the subject of EU politics and administration. His publications in English include: *The European Civil Service in (Times of) Crisis: A political sociology of the changing power of Eurocrats* (Palgrave, 2017), the edited volumes of *The Changing Topography of the EU Administration* (Palgrave, 2024), and *The Field of Eurocracy: Mapping EU Actors and Professionals* (Palgrave, 2013, with J. Rowell).

In the 2010s, he served as both Vice-president of the French Political Science Association and of the European Confederation of Political Science Associations (ECPSA). He was also one of the founding members of the European Alliance of Humanities and Social Sciences (EASSH), which contributed to the tripling of the 2020–27 EU budget for SHS.

Christopher Hood was a Fellow Emeritus of All Souls College Oxford until his death in early 2025. He taught public administration on three continents and won five awards for research in public administration including the American Political Science Association's John Gaus Award in 2021. He was a Fellow of the United States National Academy of Public Administration and of the British Academy and was awarded honorary doctorates from the Erasmus University of Rotterdam and the Hang Seng University of Hong Kong. His most recent book (co-written with Maia King, Iain McLean and Barbara Piotrowska) was *The Way the Money Goes: The*

Fiscal Constitution and Public Spending in the UK (Oxford University Press 2023).

Masao Kikuchi is Professor of Public Policy and Management at the Department of Public Management, School of Business Administration, Meiji University in Tokyo, Japan. He has published numerous articles both in international and Japanese journals such as *Public Administration Review*, *Asian Review of Public Administration*, *International Public Management Review*, *Environmental Policy and Governance*, *Lex localis — Journal of Local Self-Government*, and others. He also contributed chapters and monographs in *Political Patronage in Asian Bureaucracies*, *Handbook on the Politics of Public Administration*, *International Handbook on Civil Service Systems*, *Handbook of Public Administration in East Asia*, and others. He serves as editorial board member of *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, *International Journal of Public Administration*, *Public Organization Review* and others.

Vincent Martigny is Professor of Political science at the University of Nice Côte d'Azur and Head of Department. He is a member of the Center for European and Social Change (ERMES) and Research Associate at CEVIPOF (Sciences Po research centre for French Politics). He is also a part-time Professor at the Ecole polytechnique, where he chairs the Public Administration program of the university. His research focuses on French politics, and more specifically on the issue of the presidentialization of political systems and the role of core executives in six world democracies, along with Guy Peters. His publications include a book on that issue, *Le retour du Prince* (2019) and several academic articles in French and English dedicated to the study of French Politics with a focus on the main French presidential advisor, the Secretary general of the French Presidency.

Keun Namkoong is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Seoul National University of Science and Technology. He received his PhD from the University of Pittsburgh. His research focuses on public policy theories, bureaucracy, and administrative reforms. He has authored, co-authored, and edited numerous articles and books,

including *Public Administration and Policy in Korea*, *Research Methods for Public Administration*, *Policy Sciences: Theories and Empirical Studies*, and *Governing from the Center in Korea*.

He has served as Editor-in-Chief of both the *Korean Public Administration Review* and the *Korean Journal of Public Administration*, and has held leadership roles as President of the Korean Association for Public Administration and President of Seoul National University of Science and Technology.

B. Guy Peters is Maurice Falk Professor of Government at the University of Pittsburgh. He is founding president of the International Public Policy Association, and also editor of the *International Review of Public Policy*. He has honorary doctorates from four European universities, and lifetime achievement awards from several scholarly organizations. His most recent books include *Administrative Traditions* (Oxford University Press) and *Political Patronage in Asian Public Bureaucracies* (Cambridge University Press).

Jos C.N. Raadschelders is Professor of public administration at the John Glenn College of Public Affairs at Ohio State University. He serves as the co-editor in chief of *Public Administration Review*. Research interests include history of government, comparative government, the nature of the study of public administration, position and rule of government in societies over time, civil service systems, bureaucracy and democracy. He is a Fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration.

Donald J. Savoie holds the Canada Research Chair in Public Administration and Governance (Tier 1) at l'Université de Moncton. His research achievements are prodigious and his influence on Canada's public policy and Canadian public administration has been evident for years. He has won numerous prizes and awards both in Canada and at the international level for his work and has been awarded eight honorary degrees from Canadian universities. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1992 and made a Companion of the Order of Canada in 2022.

Göran Sundström is Professor of Political Science at Stockholm University and Head of Department. His research is on public administration and administrative reform, core executives, the role of civil servants in a transformed state, the Europeanization of nation states, governance and institutional theory. He is a co-writer of the book *Governing the Embedded State: The Organizational Dimension of Governance* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and editor of the section on Public Administration in the book *The Swedish Handbook of Swedish Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2016). He has recently led a research program on the planning and building of the hospital Nya Karolinska Solna, using a megaproject-perspective. Currently, he participates in two comparative research projects: one on coordination in core executives, and one on political advisers in core executives.

Sandra van Thiel is professor of public management at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam and at the Department of Public Administration at Radboud University, Nijmegen. Her research revolves mainly around executive agencies and public bodies and their relationship with the parent department. She has published on topics of public management, executive agencies and research methodology in international refereed journals and with academic publishers. Examples include the *Palgrave Handbook on Public Administration and Public Management in Europe* (with Edoardo Ongaro) and *Research Methods in Public Administration and Public Management* (Routledge). She is also the Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Public Sector Management* (IJPSM). Next to her academic work, she is a frequent consultant to governments and executive agencies, in the Netherlands and abroad. In 2012 she coordinated a parliamentary inquiry for the Dutch Senate and as of 2024 she is the chair of the scientific advisory council for the Dutch national police force.

Sylvia Veit is Professor of Public Administration and Digital Government at the Helmut Schmidt University in Hamburg, Germany. Previously, she was Professor of Public Management at

the University of Kassel, Germany. Her research focuses on political-administrative relations, administrative reform, and policy advice systems. She has worked extensively on the politicization of public administration and the career patterns of top civil servants and executive politicians. A particular focus is the development of the ministerial bureaucracy in Germany since the beginning of the 20th century.

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ISBN 978-0-88659-306-3



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