

9

Public managers and politics

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Politicians frequently swear at their top administrators; the nineteenth-century Prussian reformer vom Stein regarded them as 'interestless scriveners', and Bismarck — as well as others afterwards, including Hitler — showed deep contempt for bureaucrats. On the other hand, central government personnel usually await the advent of a new minister with curiosity as to how long it will take them to educate the minister to lead the bureaucracy and to accept departmental policy views. Obviously, politicians and public managers are likely to have contradictory role expectations. It remains, however, a matter of empirical research to ascertain to what extent political leadership and civil service are functionally integrated, thus enabling the politico-administrative system to work effectively, if not smoothly and without personal tensions.

When dealing with the relationship between public managers and politics one is immediately caught up in the intricacies of political theory, constitutional traditions and orthodox administrative science views, which customarily treat the problem under consideration in the framework of the politics-administration dichotomy. Although most administrative scientists today might agree that this classical framework is a descriptively misleading conception of two separate realms of politics and administration, we can hardly abandon the dichotomy for theoretical reasons, as we might run into difficulties when trying to draw organization charts with horizontal lines to indicate hierarchical relationships or having top executives sit on the ground floor of their office building and the clerks on the top.

In this chapter I shall employ some traditional conceptualizations of the politics-administration dichotomy relating to Max Weber, using them to analyse empirically some aspects of the complicated relationship between public managers and politics. It is useful to draw attention to the historical differentiation of the polity that brought about the separation of powers and led to the emergence of distinct political and administrative roles. Then, in a functional analysis, the facts-values distinction will be confronted with empirical findings revealing the degree of objective involvement of top administrators in the political process. Subsequently, I shall elaborate on measures of personnel policy which serve as mechan-

isms for politically controlling bureaucracy. Finally I shall ask if the introduction of management techniques has been helpful in solving the political control problem.

Polity differentiation and the emergence of distinct roles

The politics-administration dichotomy is intellectually rooted in the doctrine of separation of powers as a system of political checks and balances, in which the executive branch draws its legitimacy from Parliament. It is, however, not merely a normative theory which has a strong bearing on most civil service codes and in particular implies that the neutral execution of written law should guide administrative decision-making, but it also reflects the change undergone by most Western political systems during the last two centuries: the coming into existence of Parliaments and political parties, organized interest groups and mass media. The absolutist state on the continent was transformed and the polity differentiated into various subsystems, among which bureaucracy remained as but one, albeit important, power centre exposed to an increasing number of conflicting interests and rivalling expectations. The absolutist bureaucracy, for instance in Prussia, was occasionally far from being merely the obedient servant of the king's 'personal regime' but was itself rather an agglomeration of conflicting provincial and societal interests. With the advent of constitutional monarchy, even more within republican states and competitive party systems, the relationship between 'political master and staff for domination', to put it in Max Weber's terms, became more complicated. Whereas under absolutist rule top administrators were often politicians and ministers juridically civil servants, roles became formally differentiated as (at least prime) ministers were elected and supported by a parliamentary majority and stayed in office for a limited number of years. The by then tenured, professionally trained, appointed and salaried full-time civil servant who went through a career to the top of the administrative hierarchy, faced the elected, transitory amateur as his political master, who after the introduction of equal suffrage sometimes came from the working-class. The structural differentiation of the polity coincided, at least after revolutionary constitutional changes, with a social differentiation of politicians and higher civil servants; republican governments under social democratic leadership had to work with a ministerial bureaucracy predominantly recruited from the nobility and still monarchist in orientation, as in Germany after 1919. Even today top administrators not only fall short of corresponding to the idea of a socially representative bureaucracy, but also are more likely to be upper-middle-class in origin and university trained than are politicians

(Aberbach et al., 1981: 47–67). On the other hand, both groups of politico-administrative actors have become assimilated, since politicians, as Max Weber had already observed, increasingly tended rather to 'live from politics than to live for politics'. Despite this professionalization of politicians, the career path of both elite groups remained quite distinct with a predictable career and job security in the one case and more 'entrepreneurial', competitive, uncertain political careers and transitory maintenance of top positions in the case of politicians.

There are, though, marked national differences in the degree to which there is horizontal career mobility between the realms and arenas of politics and administration, depending basically on the institutional safeguards developed to secure the neutrality of the civil service. Whereas some countries practise total ineligibility and even non-affiliation with political parties as a norm (Great Britain), others allow public servants to become members of political parties as their civil right and even to run election campaigns while formally in office (e.g. in Germany and France).

Obviously, there exists a goal conflict between preserving neutrality, non-partisanship (historically: incorruptibility) and expertise in particular with respect to executive agencies, and, on the other hand, securing the political responsiveness of the ministerial bureaucracy to leading politicians. In any case, the circulation of elite members between politics and administration bears not only the potential for party politicizing the — in normative prescription — neutral bureaucracy, but also for bureaucratizing politics. Judged against these norms, reality must appear problematic. It should, however, not be overlooked that the very notion of separation of powers, at least as far as the relationship between Parliament and government is concerned, has become historically weak, since in reality most European countries are characterized by party government with ministers regularly being members of Parliament.¹ To the extent the notion of linkage rather than separation of powers applies better, we notice that, at least in some countries, the actual threshold between politics and administration is located somewhere below the administratively defined top position; the exact borderline depends on the extent to which political criteria may be or actually are applied in staffing these positions, to what extent subjective role understanding is political rather than bureaucratic, and on the degree of civil servants' involvement in the policy process.

Top administrators and politicians in the policy process

What in systems perspective means separation of powers or — more

generally speaking — differentiation of the polity, in an organizational perspective implies the emergence of at least two distinct types of positions and actors. Weber (1919) in particular pointed out that politicians act in public and in Parliament as their arena, while administrators stay in offices and on boards; that politicians' medium is voice, whereas bureaucrats rely on the written word and records; that politicians' imperative is the fight for power as opposed to the obedience of disciplined officials working *sine ira et studio*. Furthermore, Weber regarded the typical politician as an actor who tries to persuade and to convince people, with passion and occasionally with charisma; the administrator, on the other hand, was supposed to argue, to be a scientifically trained problem-solver opposed to the preference changer; and he — in principle — would play this role impassionately and impersonally.²

Clearly, these characteristics refer to the policy process and to the functioning of both groups of actors in politics. Rather than the original Weberian theory of political domination, organization sociologists have emphasized an additional implication: politicians are regarded as the goal-setters, while administrators are supposed to select adequate means to achieve those goals and to implement political visions. In other words: politicians cope with what may be called *normative complexity*, while the function of civil servants can be seen as reducing *factual uncertainty* by relying on routines and applying professional expertise stored in the records. In this view only politicians are in a position to bring about *substantive rationality*, whereas civil servants produce at best *formal rationality*. This means-ends and facts-value dichotomy is, however, a logical distinction highly inappropriate for conceptualizing the interaction between politician and administrator. It reflects the logic of legitimating administrative decisions rather than depicting the legitimizing process. It can serve us, however, as a starting point from which to shed some light on the mutual functioning of political and administrative actors in the decision process beyond those characteristics Weber had regarded as typical.

A good deal of what a ministry does — apart from policy implementation and control of the implementation process — is devising new policies and programmes, which often have to be legislated. Given that these new policies are innovative, that they are incremental or pre-programmed by previous decisions, the initiative for dealing with a problem, defining it and devising (alternative) ways to solve it, often originate in the operative sections at the bottom of the ministerial hierarchy. Of course, to a certain degree, the decision-making process is fuelled by problems and policy proposals from party and election programmes; but

already government declarations are regularly a *mixtum compositum* of political initiatives and bureaucratic suggestions. In any case, central political initiatives as well as decentral bureaucratic proposals have to be mediated into the operating units and on to the political layer, respectively. Gearing each side to the other is basically the function of the two top administrative levels in the hierarchy. For top administrators this means either to operationalize policy goals, to specify the (basically normative) decision premises, and to anticipate constraints as well as political feasibility, or to filter decentral initiatives through perceived or anticipated decision premises of the minister. Even routine matters, which normally would not involve the minister but are decided by officials, have to be evaluated with respect to potential political repercussions.

Matching political preferences and administrative professional and procedural expertness requires vertical communication. Contrary to the classical mechanistic model of hierarchical top-down decision-making and bottom-up reporting, the process of adjusting normative and factual decision premises is a dynamic, iterative process (Mayntz and Scharpf, 1975: 100). In addition, it is highly selective, as the intensity of vertical communication varies with each stage in the process and with issue salience; whereas entire divisions in a ministry may work on auto-pilot (Rose, 1985: 3), there are issues of particular political attention, for which the minister is held accountable, with which he identifies, and through which he wants to become renowned as a competent policy-maker. This means that the intensity of communication between division heads and minister will increase. For instance, a recent empirical study in German Länder ministries found that 16 percent of division heads speak to their superior once a week or even less, while 78 percent communicate twice or three times a week, and 6 percent even had daily interaction (Derlien, 1985b: 75).

Not only are top civil servants more involved in internal vertical communication, but the frequency of external contacts with other ministries, including the office of the head of government, to parliamentary bodies, interest group representatives and press relations, increases the higher the rank of the civil servant (Aberbach et al., 1981: 209ff). The arena of policy-making changes, too, as we move up the hierarchy: whereas the operative units basically communicate with sections in other departments or with subordinate authorities and exchange information, top administrators are more likely to be engaged in parliamentary or cabinet committees (often accompanied by section heads to assist them) or — depending on the political culture — occasionally to appear in public; even more so does, of course, the politician. A German

minister often spends only one-third of his working hours in his department (Wagener, 1971: 6). While his function is predominantly representing and 'selling' departmental policy in order to reach a consensus and secure party support as his most important political resource, the top manager is rather involved in resolving conflicts, which are engendered in lower-level internal and external horizontal communications. The mechanism to shift controversial matters up the hierarchy, which is well known from the process of settling budgetary disputes, also shifts power upwards. So far the decision patterns follow the management-by-exception model. As the typical form of conflict resolution, bargaining implies changing the political preference structure, this power shift mechanism thus serves politically to control lower-level co-ordination and transports consensus building on to hierarchical levels, which are normally more informed about the politician's willingness and limitations to compromise, and are better legitimized to bargain.

Only the most essential matters then are referred to the minister for decision, whereas issues of minor political importance are accomplished by top administrators. This function of filtering the vertical flow of information presupposes that top administrators have developed the sensitivity to recognize what might be of political importance and should be reported to the political top.

There is, however, not merely a gradual, but also a qualitative difference between top administrators and politicians when it comes to managing a department with respect to organizing, staffing and budgeting. Not taking into account those ministries which are functionally specialized within government to deal with budgeting (Finance, Treasury) or staffing (Civil Service Department) as their professional policy field, management tasks within a department are to fulfil subsidiary functions for policy development and long-term maintenance functions for the effectiveness of the apparatus, independent of specific governments and their policies. It might be a generalization to say that politicians are involved in management functions merely in cases which again are defined as exceptional (setting overall budgetary priorities or bargaining a percentage of budget cut-backs with the finance minister) or which formally have to be authorized (major reorganizations). Of course, there are differences between ministers with respect to their management capabilities and interests, but in general the initiatives originate in the department and proposals are elaborated in close contact with the top civil servant before a minister is informed or gets involved. It is, one could say, the privilege of the permanent top administrator, as opposed to the parliamentary secretary of state or the minister, to control management decisions implying the maintenance of

administrative resources. Only to the extent that these questions have an important bearing on substantive policy matters is the minister asked for a decision or takes an active stand in them, although it is questionable whether politicians care about organizational matters for more than symbolic reasons (March and Olson, 1983). Complementarily, it is rather the top administrator who considers the resource implications of substantive policy issues. Undoubtedly, though, politicians are seriously concerned with the appointment of their closest collaborators, the top administrators.

The importance of management decisions in shaping the role of the top administrator does not mean that such administrators are preoccupied with management problems; their involvement in policy development is regularly too time-consuming to specialize solely in the 'administration of administration'. This might explain why heads of the management division of German federal ministries do not have a better chance of being appointed secretaries of state than heads of line divisions (Derlien, 1986).

This so far stylized picture is more complicated in reality, taking into account that often there can be more top actors involved in the running of a department. Owing to the increasing number of public tasks and the expansion of central government departments in most European countries, the number not only of top administrative but also of political positions has grown. Some German departments acquired additional secretaries of state in the late 1960s, and in Britain deputy secretaries of state were introduced. Furthermore, staff units occasionally fulfil important co-ordinating functions instead of top line administrators, most prominently so in France (Thuillier, 1982).

When staff units take over co-ordinating functions or more top political positions are installed, departmental management tends to deviate from the classical monocratic model, because the function of, say, a German secretary of state as departmental co-ordinator might change into that of a super-division head, occasionally even allowing the parliamentary secretary of state to concentrate on management functions in the narrow sense (Mayntz and Scharpf, 1975: 86). As the relationships at the top of a ministry are seldom formalized and co-operation to a great extent depends on the personalities of the actors, formally monocratic political authority can in fact be transformed into collegial modes of leadership. When the configurations become more complex, formal positional differences are blurred and the qualification of actors as rather political or bureaucratic is even more difficult in terms of their empirical function in the policy process. Whatever the actual configuration, public managers have a broader range of political

discretion than would have been attributed to them in the classical notion. Thus, the empirical evidence available shows that the ministerial bureaucracy in toto and the role of the top administrator are functionally political.

Political control by personnel policy

Is the high compatibility of subjective role understanding of top administrators and (parliamentary) politicians brought about by their operating in a functionally politicized context? Is political role understanding, so to speak, automatically produced once ideologies and myths have become unbearable? Presupposing such an automatism, which would result in pre-stabilized harmony of both sets of actors, could lead us to underestimate the problem of politically controlling a huge bureaucratic apparatus like a government department and preventing it from emancipating itself from its political master. Even when excluding from our consideration cases of bureaucratic disloyalty or sabotage, information leaks and withholding information from a minister, the political responsibility of a minister today cannot be fully exerted, as the complexity of tasks and openness of decision-making prevent him from knowing everything that goes on in his department. The law of requisite variety limits his attention and information-processing capacity vis-à-vis an apparatus of overwhelming expertise, renders political control necessarily selective, and enables the bureaucracy to become politically self-controlling, as Max Weber had already observed. The politician, therefore, will tend to broaden his control capacity.

One way to do this is to build up staff units; the French *cabinets ministériels* are the prototype for a structural solution to increase political control capacity. However, they have resulted in an impairment of the top executive's line authority. In most European countries and the United States, furthermore, the staff solution can rather be observed on the level of the chief of government in order to secure inter-departmental co-ordination (Rose and Suleiman, 1980).

Another solution observable in a number of countries consists of super-imposing more genuine politicians on to a closed civil service career system with immobility of top executives. The politically neutralized, although not apolitical, Whitehall bureaucracy then might function quite smoothly, because there is a great number of MPs appointed to political executive positions; certainly, the sixty sub-cabinet positions and thirty-six unpaid parliamentary private secretaries also serve a patronage function for the parliamentary faction (Rose, 1980: 6), but they do enable ministers to delegate external relations and to broaden the internal political control

capacity. Increasing the number of political appointees in the executive branch may, however, create co-ordination problems as well as problems of balancing the division of labour in departmental management mentioned earlier.

A functional alternative as well as an additional device to enhance the control capacity of ministers over their bureaucratic staff is the selective promotion of political trustees within the civil service career system. Be it in staffing the ministerial cabinet, or in appointing top line administrators, ministers all over the world try to select those candidates whom they regard as valuable collaborators in the policy process, because they supposedly share normative convictions with the minister. This congeniality reduces the need to communicate normative political decision premises and allows the politician to rely on the candidate's political self-control. Selective, politically motivated promotion is possible even in a closed career system, as the recent change in personnel policy in Whitehall indicates (Ridley, 1985). The widest range of politically motivated staffing is notorious in the American spoil system (Heclo, 1977; Fesler, 1983) where political appointees as well as the senior executive service can be removed from office and new trustees appointed to vacancies from within and without the career service. Other countries like France and Germany (Johnson, 1983: 189) know merely the 'political civil servants', who can be temporarily retired, an institution that is particularly made use of after changes in government (Derlien, 1984). Here vacancies are predominantly, though not exclusively, filled with insiders. Of course, with public employees instead of tenured civil servants (as is partly the case with the personnel in French cabinets) it is even easier to purge important positions. The most modest form of gearing top career civil servants to the political requirements of the day is to reshuffle them and bring those looked at with disgrace into politically less sensitive positions. If reshuffling is not possible because of strict immobility, new positions might be established and filled with trustees in order to circumvent or control mistrusted office-holders.

These are not only the basic mechanisms for practically substituting communicated political decision premises by socialized convictions; in my view they also contribute to an explanation of why top administrators on average fit into a functionally politicized environment and exhibit a role understanding which is compatible and partly congruent with that of politicians. The wide range of informal devices available for political control by personnel policy could also help to explain why there are hardly any differences in the subjective role understanding of top civil servants despite different formal prescriptions for recruitment into top administrative positions

(Putnam, 1973). Even the formally most extreme cases of staffing top executive positions, Whitehall and Washington, can actually converge towards a 'whitewash' system.³ Politically motivated staffing thus bears the potential for degenerating into party-politicization. The more party affiliation or party membership becomes the sole criterion of recruiting into top executive positions and expertise loses importance, the more career civil servants will be demotivated to strive for promotion, and therefore the most effective traditional mechanism for safeguarding expertise and loyalty will be jeopardized. Also, the frictions in case of a change in government will be multiplied when party-politicization has gone on for a longer period of time, the result being in the long run an acceleration of the process and ultimately a spoil system or a system of proportional politicization as in Belgium (Moulin, 1975). But these potential long-term implications even for career systems should not be used by classical bureaucrats to denounce every promotion of talented career civil servants who manage to combine expertise with political knowledge and who are particularly aware of their function in the differentiated politico-administrative system.⁴

Political control by management techniques?

Having elaborated the political environment of public managers, the structural context, their functional involvement in the policy process, their concomitantly accepting a more or less political role understanding, and various mechanisms of personnel policy which to a certain extent might have brought about a fit between these elements, we return to systemic questions. From a functionalist point of view, we can clearly observe a high degree of interpenetration of the legislative and the executive subsystems of the polity (Mayntz, 1983). The more politicians hold functions in both of the systems, the more top administrators share segments of their role with that of their minister, the more they engage in political parties, gain parliamentary mandates and are appointed as top administrators because of these very properties, the more politics and ministerial bureaucracy (formerly, differentiated systems socially and career-wise) become de-differentiated. At least, the borderline between the two systems has shifted deeper, downwards into the executive branch, since ministers are recruited from Parliaments and top civil servants become party-politicized. To the extent that party membership over-rides expertise as the decisive criterion for recruitment into top administrative positions, one could even state a regression of the system towards its eighteenth-century state, when ascribed properties like social class or family bonds were dominant recruitment criteria.

On the other hand, it is arguable that the systems are still being kept separate, as political and administrative careers are distinct and inter-sectoral mobility is low or one-sided, as long as (junior and lower) civil servants enter politics. What may have appeared as de-differentiation or regression, then, could also be interpreted as a state of the system, in which internal complexity has been increased by mutually incorporating elements of the other system in order to cope with the increased complexity of the administrative and political environment, respectively. Functional role differentiation within Parliament (bureaucratic skills and positions) and within administration (political roles and skills) require yet more complex forms of information processing.

It is within this context (together with the general trend of expanding state activities) that the various attempts to improve the manageability of the executive branch since the late 1960s are rooted and can be understood. Integrated planning and budgeting systems of the PPBS type, cost-benefit analyses, and programme evaluation were meant to rationalize policy and policy-making in order to replace traditional piece-meal engineering, incrementalism and adhocism by goal-oriented, comprehensive and long-range planning. Management by objectives, performance appraisal, payment schemes and new recruitment and staffing procedures have been brought about by civil service reforms aimed at increasing productivity in government. These reforms (Caiden and Siedentopf, 1982), however, often failed, were implemented half-heartedly or later reduced, leaving the traditional system basically as it was before — except for the increased number of staff positions as well as analytical specialists in these positions.

Among the multiple reasons for the failure of most reform attempts, two are of theoretical significance here. Planning systems, which follow the logic of decision-making and aim at comprehensiveness, were bound to fail within a turbulent political environment creating contradictory and unstable normative preferences incompatible with established executive plans. Secondly, organizational models and instruments for personnel policy (as well as decision tools) were often borrowed from business administration and followed the logic of hierarchical, closed decision-making inappropriate to the open system of politics and the cognitive uncertainties and fragmented powers operating there. Therefore, the hope of coping with the problem of politically controlling the ministerial bureaucracy by introducing management techniques and by moulding the role of the top administrators towards the model of the manager in private industry was shattered. Top administrators remained 'reduced' politicians, and these management techniques, as far as

they were perpetuated, were carried out by people in staff units. The dilemma still is that, on the one hand, they strengthen the control capacity of the top vis-à-vis the apparatus, and on the other hand the control problem is duplicated, although to a lesser degree, in the ancient question of who is to control the controllers. The answer, in my view, very often was given by politicizing appointments to important staff and line positions in order to keep the management specialists under political control.

Notes

1. In France ministers resign from their parliamentary mandate on the national, but not necessarily on the local level. See also for The Netherlands, Kooiman (1982).

2. Weber, however, in his practical political assessments did not go as far as Schmoller to maintain that civil servants represented the common weal materializing the Hegelian Vernunft. It is often overlooked that the Weber brothers were politically extremely hostile towards the bureaucratic machine and castigated Schmoller's apologetic positions as 'state metaphysics' (Alfred Weber 1950).

3. I owe this expression to Bert Rockman, Pittsburgh.

4. There seems to be a tendency to complain about party politicization after left-wing parties have taken over government as in France in 1981 (Bodiguel 1983), in Germany in 1969 (Derlien 1985a), in Finland in 1966 (Ståhlberg 1985) or — more generally — when mainstream policies are to be replaced by policies based on firm principles and ideologies as in Britain (Ridley 1985).

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