

**PUBLIC SERVANTS TO PUBLIC MANAGERS: THE EUROPEAN STORY:
TRANSFORMATION OR TORTURE?**

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Introduction

One story is that traditional, rule-following bureaucrats are being transformed into professional managers and performance-oriented leaders. New training programmes and recruitment and assessment procedures are ensuring that the top civil servants of today and tomorrow are - or soon will be - focused, flexible and dynamic. Sophisticated performance measurement systems replace the rigid merit or seniority systems of the past and ensure that the effective 'doers' rise to the top.

Another story is that reliable, career-based and public-spirited civil servants are being steadily replaced or side-lined by new cadres of political appointees and by the destruction of what had hitherto been their career security and its replacement by a series of short term contracts. On top of this, fiscal pressures reduce the scope for service development (and, incidentally, often result in cuts to training programmes). All of which reduce the chances that civil servants will 'speak truth to power'. Civil servants are being steadily tortured into submission by the combined forces of neo-liberalism and generic managerialism.

One thing we can say with some confidence is that, if we are speaking of Europe as a whole, neither of these stories is true. In fact, to take the point further, there are very few unqualified generalizations of any kind that we can accurately make about the recent trajectories of European civil services. The reasons for this caution about generalization will be familiar ones to any scholar who studies comparative public administration. [In what follows I shall refer almost entirely to Western Europe. I shall thus omit both the EU institutions themselves and also the countries of CEE. Both of these have recently attracted a good deal of excellent PA scholarship, but I already have more to deal with that I can handle within one short presentation.]

The first reason why generalization is difficult is that different countries start from very different places. By 'places' I here mean civil service traditions, the nature of the interface with politics, the perceived status of appointed public officials and what are deemed to be the most salient problems of the day (Demmke and Moilan, 2010; Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014; Painter and Peters, 2010, Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). Just think, for a moment, about the contrasts between, on the one hand, oil-rich Norway, with a secure, well-paid public service, low corruption and no austerity and, on the other, Portugal, with a culture still tinged with patronage and public services suffering from large percentage cutbacks in both numbers and salaries. Or think of the vast differences in the extent to which NPM-style performance management techniques have penetrated different national administrations (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014, pp228-239 and 241-2).

Second, countries travel at different speeds, partly because their *capacities* for rapid change are vastly different. Different factors influence this potential. For example, some legal systems make administrative reform a very heavy, uncertain and time-consuming process, whereas others allow changes to be made at relatively low political costs (Pollitt, 2007; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011, pp37-38). Or again, previous experience of successfully managed change tends to breed the capacity for further reform.

Third, they travel in somewhat different directions and even, sometimes, do their best to turn back (e.g. Meyer-Sahling, 2009). Some, like the UK, are still saturated with NPM-type thinking. Others, like France regard NPM with deep suspicion as an alien, 'Anglo-Saxon' set of ideas. Others still, like Denmark and Sweden cautiously borrow NPM elements, but adapt them to fit with their far more pro-state traditions. Some are still battling patronage and corruption (like Italy) while others are largely free of these problems and can concentrate on other priorities (Finland, Norway).

Fourth, there are vast differences between different groups of public servants. The experiences of, respectively, top civil servants, professional service deliverers (such as police, teachers or nurses) and rank and file operational staff (such as postpersons or road sweepers) may each be quite different, as they have often also been in the past. At the very top, we may find some examples of a new kind of flexible, politically savvy fixer - a more politicized and more generously paid 21st century Sir Humphrey - while at the bottom we may find thousands of operational staff made redundant and, if they are lucky, re-employed by private sector operators with reduced job security and pension rights.

Furthermore, the basic terms we use can themselves be treacherous – especially when used in international comparisons. The meanings of terms such as 'civil servant', or 'public servant' vary a good deal from country to country (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014, pp29-31). In this paper I will use the two terms fairly much in UK terms, i.e. 'civil servants' are those who are directly employed by central government, while 'public servants' is a term encompassing both civil servants and the vast range of other officers who are directly employed by all parts of the state apparatus. In my usage, therefore, public servants include teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, the police, members of inspectorates, local government administrators and so on.

Given this diversity, should we abandon the quest for generalizations altogether? I would argue not. We should abandon stories of inexorable global tides sweeping over every country and every sector – there are good reasons why they have never existed, at least not outside the minds of a few politicians, management consultants and over-enthusiastic professors. But there is no reason to abandon the search for middle-level, carefully contextualized generalizations (Pollitt, 2013). Indeed, existing research has already generated some of these, and further research will almost certainly generate more. So let us now have a look at some key factors, where they bear directly on the question of what has been happening to many European public servants.

Diminishing differences between public and private sector employment

First, in a number of European countries, legal differences in the basis of employment between public and private sector employees have been reduced or, in some cases, abolished (Demmke and Moilanen, 2010, p192-201; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011, pp87-95). More appointments have become term appointments and contractual or quasi-contractual in nature. Tenure has been weakened. Pay has been more closely linked to measured performance. This has affected all levels, but the lower and middle tiers probably somewhat more than the very top civil servants. Moves in this direction (sometimes termed ‘normalisation’) have been made during the last 25 years in, for example, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and the UK. Consider the following observation from Italian scholars who researched reforms to Italian ministerial cabinets since 1990:

‘[N]ew tools for steering have been interposed between the political and the managerial spheres. In particular, the privatization of public employment has increased ministerial discretion in appointing senior executives, as it has made it possible to hire public managers on fixed term contracts, who have thus lost security of tenure’ (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2013b, p334).

Increasing politicization of the upper echelons of ministerial advisers

The increase in the numbers and influence of political appointments has been noticeable in many countries, including Belgium, France, Finland and the UK. As an OECD review noted: ‘their sheer number and the opacity surrounding their status have prompted widespread concern in the last decade in many countries’ (OECD, 2011, p9). Even in meritocratic Sweden some top administrative appointments have tended to become more party political (Molander et al, 2002). In some countries, such as Finland, the numbers of these new political appointments are small, but even there the handful of ‘Political State Secretaries’ have eaten into the policy advice zones previously dominated by career permanent secretaries. In other countries the numbers are much greater - in the UK, for example, where political advisers have played prominent roles under Blair, Brown and Cameron, or in Belgium, where the even OECD has questioned the wisdom of their policy of appointing large numbers of contract employees to support ministers in policy functions (OECD, 2007). Talbot (2014, p752) describes the UK situation as follows:

‘Taken together, SPADS [Political advisers] and tsars [special appointments by ministers to review policy in a particular area] represent a significant shift in the way in which the policy-advice function operates in central government. There are probably today well over 130 SPADS and tsars at any one time engaged in policy advice roles in British central government’

This may be peanuts in American terms, but it indeed ‘represents a significant shift’ for the UK. Sir Humphrey would not have been amused. He did not always win his arguments with his minister (Borins, 2011, pp75-80) but he was undisputed master of policy advice within his own

department. Nor would he have been comfortable with the new system by which ministers can choose their permanent secretaries (from a shortlist presented to them), where each head of department has their personal objectives published, and where they seem to have been moving from post to post faster than ever before, thus undermining continuity (Freeguard et al, 2014, p26-31; Rutter, 2014; Stanley, 2015). Finally, we should mention that the appointment of the top executives in the European Commission - the Commissioners themselves - whilst previously already a fairly political business, has recently become even more so (Wille, 2012).

One might argue that the multiplication of political advisers and similar special appointments was offset by new freedoms which had been granted to top career officials as a result of NPM-style policies. Has there not been a trend towards 'letting the manager manage'? The answer here is that, rhetorically, there was (although this trope has virtually disappeared with advent of austerity). Operationally, however, the picture is much less clear. In a number of countries nominal autonomy has been equalled or outweighed by some combination of political interventions and tightly-focused performance management (see, e.g. De Visscher and Randour, 2014 for Belgium and Stanley, 2015 for the UK).

Of course some major EU member states have always had highly politicized top civil servants. In France the careers of members of the *grands corps* have long moved effortlessly between ministerial and technocratic careers, although the degree of politicization in ministerial cabinets has evidently increased (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011, p273; Rouban, 2007). In the last decade or two these high flyers have also increasingly taken part of their careers in the board rooms of France's leading companies. There is no British tradition of an apolitical senior civil service here. And neither is there in Germany, where, although administrative careers and political careers are less overtly intertwined than in France, top administrators are usually known to have particular party political affinities, and their careers are affected by this. In recent years this type of politicization has, if anything, been strengthening rather than weakening.

Technological change

Another major effect on public service work has been technological change and, more particularly, the advent of 'digital government' (Dunleavy et al, 2006; Dunleavy and Carrera, 2013). Technological change has multiple impacts on public service work. It shifts the locations at which types of work are carried out; it changes the substance of the work done; it changes the training that is required; it affects the relationship with the citizen/service user; it changes the cost structure of the operation and it often necessitates changes in the rules and regulations (Pollitt, 2012, pp54-70).

Of course the precise impact varies enormously from one sector or type of work to another, and from one level in the hierarchy to another (Pollitt, 2012, pp140-191). But it is often substantial. If a generalization can be made it would probably be that overall digitalization points towards a smaller but more highly skilled staff. It also has a variety of (often little-researched) effects on

the way that citizens relate to public administration (Pollitt, 2012, *passim*). Now we sit at home watching a screen. Previously we went to an office and dealt with an official, who had a face and a manner, and who represented that particular service in a very tangible way.

Austerity

Austerity has already had a pervasive effect on public servants in most European countries (Bach and Bordogna, 2013; Bordogna and Pedersini, 2013; DiMascio and Natalini, 2013a; Talbot, 2014). Only a few - Germany, Norway, Sweden - have thus far largely escaped acute fiscal pain. Many countries have experienced pay freezes or pay cuts. Hiring freezes have also been common (OECD, 2012, pp47-51). Civil service numbers have been cut (very fast and very early in the case of the UK – see Page et al, 2012). Public service pension entitlements have been changed to less generous terms. The most frequent approaches have been across-the-board cuts and freezes, combined with a certain re-centralization of both fiscal and personnel authority (Bach and Bordogna, 2013; Kickert et al, 2013). All these things have worked together to make public service careers less attractive. The leadership and change rhetoric cannot disguise the fact that leaders are having to lead in what are under dismal circumstances for most of their followers (Page et al, 2012). Furthermore the very business of many public servants - providing services to citizens - has become less satisfying, as the name of the game changed from developing services to finding ways of cutting back on expenditure. It may be true to say that many working in the private sector have suffered even more acutely, but that is hardly a strong source of comfort for those whose own terms and conditions of employment have rapidly declined, usually with no particular prospect of reversal.

A tentative European overview

When we consider the broad-but-not-universal trends described above we can see the outlines of a bigger picture still. Whilst much diversity remains, and whilst a recognizably Weberian career service continues to exist in a number of countries, in most places the ‘balance of power’ has shifted away from that particular form. For better or worse, stability and continuity have diminished. Top civil servants have found themselves in more intense competition for the attention of their ministers. At top, middle and lower grade levels, compared with 30 years ago, security of tenure has diminished or disappeared. At the same time austerity has meant that staff numbers have been cut, material rewards have been frozen or reduced, and job satisfaction (and morale) has frequently declined. The degree to which these trends have manifested themselves varies enormously, being most severe in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, and almost invisible in Germany and Norway, but the general direction is widespread.

Public services and their cultures are often very resilient, and what we have seen thus far is neither transformation nor torture. Nevertheless, recent experiences have often been both depressing and diminishing for very many of the public servants concerned. Visions of a return to previous levels of resourcing are rare, and measures of morale are, unsurprisingly, declining.

To put it the other way round, it is hard to point to a major public service anywhere in Europe and say that it is growing in resources, confidence and public and political esteem. We are in a period when the name of the game is contraction and survival, occasionally sweetened with a light dusting of organizational and technological innovation. The gradual return of economic growth to the EU does not seem likely fundamentally to change that picture. Against this sea-change, talk of innovation, partnership and leadership may lighten the gloom slightly, but is hardly enough to convince the rank and file that ‘transformation’ is just round the corner.

Conclusion: what can academic public administration contribute?

In conclusion, we might ask what academic public administration has to say about this situation. The answer is that, until now, it has not said very much. Papers on the impacts of austerity are only now beginning to appear in PA journals in any numbers. The first major empirical book was published in 2014, and had a primarily historical perspective (Hood et al, 2014). Specific theories about the impacts of austerity are mainly drawn from economics or political science rather than from public administration (e.g. Blyth, 2013; Schäfer and Streeck, 2013). There is a yawning gap where we might expect, after four years of fiscal squeeze, there would be a budding crop of independent, analytic studies showing how cutbacks were being managed and implemented at service level. Nor do we have anything approaching a major theorized study of the specifically administrative and managerial impacts of the current round of fiscal squeeze across Europe.

We are a little better off in terms of the analysis of longer term trends in EU public services. The last 5 years have seen at least three book length comparative treatments (Demmke and Moilanen, 2010; Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014; Pollitt and Bouckert, 2011). Yet none of these fully meets the challenge described by this paper - that of simultaneously considering the interacting pressures of changing terms of employment, increased politicization, technological change and austerity.

Yet though we academics may have been slow off the mark, we are not short of tools that could be used for the job. If, as some influential academic voices assert, we are living through the replacement of government with a much more loosely articulated, multi-level, multi-actor model of governance (e.g. Osborne, 2010), then should we not apply such models to the current trajectories of European public services? But if it is indeed a transition to governance that we are witnessing, then our models of governance need to be upgraded considerably. At the moment they tend to wallow in a conceptual swamp (Pollitt and Hupe, 2011) and to yield few concrete propositions that could be investigated empirically. There is also a tendency for governance models to be pitched at a very high, abstract level, and formulated in a way that does not sufficiently allow for, or analyse, contextual variation (Pollitt, 2013). As Raadschelders (2015, p16) put it:

‘[M]ost of the governance literature focuses on system-level rather than on specific governance arrangements within organisations’.

A second obvious source of theoretical framing would be the growing body of work on public service bargains (PSBs – see Hood and Lodge, 2008). This is well-suited to the analysis of change. Each of the change factors identified in this address can be analysed in terms of its impact on the PSBs of major groups of staff. This would be a fascinating, if ambitious, approach, but as far as I am aware no-one has yet undertaken it.

A third theoretical frame could be provided by the burgeoning literature on public service motivation (PSM - see Perry and Hondeghem, 2008). This is closely connected with the idea of PSBs. Both PSM and PSB are arguably better developed, theoretically and empirically, than governance, and thus hold immediate potential for application to the current situation. In the case of PSM it would allow for researchers to begin to investigate the key question of the circumstances under which a PSM grows or diminishes. Do the adverse circumstances described in this paper actually *reduce* PSM among staff? Do they reduce the alleged distinctiveness of the basic values of EU public servants, as compared with those in the USA (Brachem and Tepe, 2015)? Do they even make public servants’ attitudes migrate towards those of private sector employees? To answer such questions one would need diachronic data - panel studies or longitudinal databases. There has been little such material available in the past, but perhaps it is beginning to become possible (Kelman, 2015)?

Or is it - finally - too much to hope for something quite new? A Theory Z, if you like. Something which, even if not quite on the scale of Weber, attempts to encompass each of the major influences briefly discussed above. This, then, would be a theory that examined and categorized a range of contextual factors, in terms of changes in the political system, degrees of austerity and pressures for technological adaptations. An early, tentative model for this might be seen in Hood and Lodge’s bold 2012 article, ‘Into an age of multiple austerities?’ Subsequently this range of external circumstances would be related to internal developments, including changes in PSBs, new skill requirements and possibly also underlying shifts in attitudes and values. Such an approach would be extremely ambitious. It would represent a revival of academic PA’s strongly inter-disciplinary past, mixing political science, administrative theory, social psychology and, to some extent, law. It would emphasize the need to consider trends over time rather than snapshots. It would also represent a move in the opposite direction to much current PA scholarship, which sometimes tends towards offering more and more detailed knowledge about more and more specific issues (Bovens, 2010; Raadschelders, 2010; Rhodes, 2010). Yet I would argue that in Europe we are undergoing a major transition - politically, culturally and economically. There is a case for putting more energy into finding imperfect answers to big questions rather than ever more precise answers to small questions.

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