

Sketching Pen-Portraits of Faceless, Anonymous Mandarins

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Missing pieces from the national portrait gallery

Sober portrait photographs of the President of Malta greet visitors to departments of the Maltese public service. Here and there, contrary to official instructions, a minister's portrait graces some out-of-the-way messengers' stations – an act of propitiatory homage to a hero of the political pantheon. Pictures of the mandarins who manage the public service are scarce. Some of the older departments – such as the venerable Customs Department – engrave the names of successive Heads on marble tablets gracing their monumental entrances – creating, as it were, a departmental lineage. Scattered photographic and canvas portraits of various worthies survive from the days prior to self-government, when the public service stood at the summit of colonial society. By and large, however, the men – they were overwhelmingly men until the 1980s – who served in Malta's public service remain faceless and anonymous, as though honouring Max Weber's classical conception of the impersonal bureaucrat.

If iconic portraits of distinguished Maltese public servants are scarce, biographical studies of them are non-existent, an exception to an emerging field of local historical enquiry. Comparatively little has been written about nineteenth century figures such as Sir Adrian Dingli (1817–1900), at various times Crown Advocate, Chief Justice and Vice-President of the Council of Government, possibly the most distinguished public official ever to grace the Maltese public service. Other civil servants, this time from the twentieth century, remain virtually unknown outside a restricted circle of elderly, retired officials. They include men of the calibre of the Hon. Edgar Cuschieri, who laid the policy and administrative foundations for Malta's post-war reconstruction, and Major Frederick Amato-Gauci, architect of the islands' social welfare administration as well as founder of the diplomatic service. A dwindling number of these are still alive, valuable custodians of the lore and oral history of the nation's oldest governing institution. Regrettably, they rarely appear on public occasions to honour their service, in the same way as veterans parade on Remembrance Sunday to remind a forgetful people about the horrors and heroism of war. The living repositories of anecdote, memory, experience and precedent diminish with the passing of every man or woman. Only the development of Malta's national archives compensates somewhat for the loss.

In defence of mandarins' portraits

At this point, the question arises: why should the lives of long-retired public servants arouse any contemporary interest? They represent the past to an administration busily constructing the nation's future. The experience that they embody, the administrative techniques they employed, the values of governance they cherished – all appear dated and irrelevant to the electronic age. It is not sufficient to claim – as a historian or antiquarian might – that the lives of eminent public servants are worthy of study because they are *tesserae* in the rich mosaic of Maltese history. Indeed, a historian may find it difficult to justify biographical research on civil servants because they simply do not excite the same interest as leading political figures do. Where in the civil service could one find the dash, colour, excitement, passionate controversy, the heroic qualities embodied in a political figure such as Dom Mintoff, who bestrode the national stage throughout the second half of the twentieth century? At least, that is the common wisdom.

The difficulty in exciting interest in civil service lives is compounded by the direction taken by public administration as a scholarly discipline during the past two decades. As it takes its intellectual cues from economists and management theorists, it has become ahistorical. The past, as they say, is another country – indeed, it is discredited in the popular mind, as well as alien! Despite growing scholarly interest in leadership, the so-called ‘New Public Management’ is prescriptive. It is driven by the academic interests of occupational psychologists and management consultants. It seeks to inculcate planning expertise and an entrepreneurial spirit in public service managers. It overshadows the political scientist’s concern with the origin and uses of power, and the historian’s interest in institutions. Mentors and models are taken from the business world, not sought in administrative lineages. Regrettably, it matters not one jot to the leaders of a much-maligned profession that mentors from the business world are generally skilful self-publicists; they will not publicly acknowledge the distinguished members of an administrative lineage, however much they might laud them in private!

The consequence of this is that serving public officers find little inspiration in the past, though a few older hands might take refuge in nostalgia for a mythical ‘Golden Age’. Indeed, they are deliberately discouraged from doing either. Far from revitalising the administrative profession, the New Public Management risks hollowing it out - by belittling its traditions, by denying its heroes, by disrupting its ethos.

What value, then, might there be in researching civil service lives in the face of both scholarly and professional indifference? The past may shed light on three leading contemporary issues – leadership, decision-making and ethics.

Studying leadership and decision-making

Contrary to popular belief, the official lives of leading public servants in the closing years of colonial rule and the first decades of independent statehood involved much work that was overtly political. They gave advice on constitutional formulae, took over the administration of the government following constitutional crises, negotiated with trade unions, prospective investors and donors of aid or technical assistance. In numerous developing states, civil servants often installed ‘technocratic’ Cabinets following military intervention in politics. They manned and guided transitional arrangements when discredited regimes were overthrown.

In Malta, the higher civil service administered the nation’s affairs under conditions of close siege during the Second World War. From 1944, as war receded from the central Mediterranean, the Service laid constitutional and material foundations for the restoration of self-government. From 1947 to 1958, it served a troubled, vulnerable Dyarchy and, when the Dyarchy collapsed in 1958, efficiently stepped into the resulting political vacuum. From 1958 until 1962, the higher civil service laid the economic and administrative foundations upon which Maltese sovereignty was erected in 1964. After independence, though clearly overshadowed by the pretensions of the political class, the higher civil service continued to administer the affairs of an ambitious young state that was not always quite sure either of its destination or of its direction. The higher civil service endured a protracted constitutional crisis (1981-1987), and remained a stabilising influence then, as well as during the regime transition that followed.

Here is evidence of leadership of a higher order than anything imagined by the proponents of New Public Management, obsessed as they are with efficient service delivery. It is instructive to examine this leadership closely - to understand its ethos, to probe its

operations, to uncover its instruments, to expose any weaknesses. It is not every mandarin who is called on to exercise leadership of a high order, nor is leadership a quality of every mandarin. Scholarly investigation must be selective and discriminating, a particular quality of biographical research. The goal of such research would be to uncover *patterns* of leadership, and to provide *models* of effective leadership in public affairs.

Case studies of decision-making could be by-products of biographical research; they would be destined for training workshops for prospective mandarins. The copious availability of official papers dealing with particular episodes provides the raw materials. Consider how instructive it might be for peace-keepers to re-visit the decisions taken by Harry Luke, Acting High Commissioner of Palestine in August 1929, when the territory erupted over a Muslim 'defilement' of the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The parallel with the Palestinian rising following Ariel Sharon's 'demonstration' on Temple Mount in September 2001 is chilling. It is not the political situation that interests the administrative scholar, nor the disturbances *per se*, but the judgement exercised by 'the man on the spot' as events unfolded. The qualities of intellect and character that influenced Harry Luke's judgement in August 1929 are as relevant in contemporary Palestine as they were then. Indeed, they are just as relevant to a police commander handling anti-globalisation protesters on the eve of a world leaders' summit, or to a head of state confronted by an inconclusive or disputed electoral result.

Faceless, anonymous ... and amoral too?

Even when events force them temporarily into the spotlight, most senior officials preserve the aura of anonymity that is an essential component of their *persona*. It is but a small step to concluding that faceless, anonymous bureaucrats are also amoral. The accusation can be levelled both at civil servants schooled in an ethos of political neutrality, as well as those for whom overt political allegiance is legitimate. In countries that embrace the cult of the state, 'reasons of state' may legitimate amoral decisions; so too, the current fad that 'the customer is always right' may legitimate decisions that have doubtful moral implications.

The response to this quandary, in the past as now, has been to define ethical principles to govern public affairs, and to establish mechanisms that scrutinise public officials and hold them to account. That is, of course, good and necessary. How much more relevant and effective might codes of conduct be, however, if officials could learn how ethical choices were made in the field, in conditions of risk and uncertainty that characterise public affairs. Once again, full-scale biographical research as well as more limited case studies could furnish material to foster learning. It would also correct the prevailing stereotypes that hold mandarins to be either paragons of virtue or morally neutered beings in the service of power.

Having considered the case for biographical research on mandarins, the question of fostering it, in the face of scholarly and professional indifference, now arises.

Fostering biographical research through schools and institutes of administration

Schools and institutes of administration constitute the natural points of reference for scholarly enquiry on public administration. However, the prevailing orthodoxy presents them with unprecedented challenges. Whether directly owned and run by public services, or part of the university system, they have been subjected to unfavourable comparison with business schools, which are now their chief competitors, for the same reasons that public administration generally is disparagingly compared with private enterprise. In many countries, schools and institutes of administration are subjected to the managerial disciplines that have become

common elsewhere in the public sector and in academia - cutbacks, competitive tendering, benchmarking, performance assessment, professional accreditation and - the ultimate indignity - privatisation.

These changes are laudable to the extent that they shake educational institutions out of complacency, foster quality, encourage innovative approaches to learning, draw scholarly endeavour closer to professional needs. They are less welcome if the pressures of competition and the prevailing hostility to administrative 'tradition' forces schools and institutes of administration to *imitate*, rather than *innovate*. This is not to argue that the goals, methods and curricula of business schools are not relevant to schools of administration - for that argument is clearly wrong. Rather, it is necessary for schools of administration to recognise that they have distinctive contributions to make to the education of any official or executive who participates in public affairs. In the areas of leadership, decision-making and ethics that lie at the heart of good governance, schools of administration have access to a tradition that is certainly richer than anything a business school could offer. It is only necessary for them to acknowledge this comparative advantage. By directing some resources to rigorous biographical research they will supply the raw material for educating up-coming generations of public officials; and, incidentally, they will furnish those missing portraits from a nation's gallery of the great and the good.

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