LABOUR POLICY IN MICROSTATES

Godfrey Baldacchino
Ph.D. Student, University of Warwick, United Kingdom

Abstract

This paper argues for the richness and relevance of conceptualising policy making in developing microstates as the management of, and by, a crew in a drifting vessel. “This elegant analogy adequately portrays the reactive nature of policy-making, the randomness of issues, and the consequential uncertainty as to strategies and outcomes, while also allowing policy-makers some limited discretion, and requiring a generous (perhaps idiosyncratic) measure of competence in directing the ship of state” (Warrington 1992, p. 15). A discussion on the usefulness of the metaphor follows in the context of our polity, its formulation, deployment and contestation in practice.

Images

“One of the most eccentric practices of the [British] Empire was to decide that certain of the more remote island colonies were not really countries at all, but ships” - Winchester (1985, p. 127).

U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had described the Mediterranean island state of Malta as an unsinkable aircraft carrier for its crucial role in the Mediterranean theatre of the Second World War (1939-45). In so doing, he unwittingly linked up with what has become a source of pervasive imagery for microstates: that of vessels at sea. Unfortunately, the actual image rarely matches the grandiose and lofty connotations evoked by Roosevelt’s statement. The vessel at sea, as far as microstates are concerned, belongs to a somewhat smaller class of embarkation. In fact, microstates have been described as tossed at the mercy of the waves (Dommen 1979); like small boats pushed out into a turbulent sea, without oars or provisions, without compass or sails (Ramphal 1984, p. 371); abandoned imperial barracks, always meant to be part of something larger, and now set adrift (Naipaul 1972, p. 270); the flotsam and jetsam of empire (ibid., p. 244). Opportunities to re- evoke the imagery are not lost by contemporary cartoonist (see Figure 1).

The analogy is evocative because it captures the dilemmas and paradoxes inherent to the understanding of microstates and which have served to fuel various conferences and publications over the last thirty odd years. At the level of political and military security, the tussle between sovereignty and fragile vulnerability has long been debated. Development economists have argued, as they yet continue to do, on the tug-of-war between dependent sustainability and self-reliant viability. The vessel at sea effectively simplifies, while providing a visual dimension to, these important deliberations.

The metaphor is also useful in helping to dispel a second, more enticing but fallacious set of images: that of a cowed servility in a terrestrial paradise. The labouring people of what today are microstates have long been projected as symbols, sometimes erotic, more often exotic and permissive, of an enviable and carefree way of life - an image of “Eden without apples”. Under the coconut trees, microstate labour affairs are represented as a coy extension of the paternalist Robinson Crusoe – Man Friday relationship. The worker is naturally lethargic but submissive, and the crowning purpose of life is to execute his Master’s orders. In spite of defying corroboration
by empirical research, these plastic stereotypes tenaciously linger on. Today they serve as a taunting bait for the tourist from the cold, depressed north as well as for the foreign investor in search of a doole labour force.

This paper takes up the suggestion by Pitt (1980, p. 1052) to refer to floating islands or ships as suggestive conceptual parallels to small island states, thus pushing forward the frontiers of microstate theorisation. The paper does so by briefly scanning the dynamics of labour policy in these vessels at sea. Labour (sic human resource) policy is understood to mean the formulation, implementation and application of decisions concerning the quantity, quality and disposition of a nation's labour force. Such a process is conceived as a dialectical one, involving both the management of labour and the often unacknowledged, management by labour in response to surrounding conditions. The focus lies squarely on the three dozen or so microstates of the developing world. A microstate is herewith taken as a politically sovereign territory (often insular or otherwise an enclave land mass) with a resident population of one million or less. The task at hand, then, is to appreciate better first how the ship's captain seeks to mobilise his crew and, second, how the crew responds, all this within the unenviable (though often not admitted) predicament of haphazard drifting.

Open Systems, Closed Worlds

With this objective in mind, a third, oppositional relationship affecting microstates is proposed. One of the most frequently resorted to characterisations of microstates is that they are open systems. The extensity of their dependent openness to trade, epidemics, hurricanes, aid, information, expatriate workers and consultants, technology, foreign investment - even models of administration, justice, democracy and development - has been documented ad nauseam. This corresponds to the responsiveness of our drifting vessel to the dynamics of the sea and the atmosphere.

The intensity and totality with which exogenous forces impact on small developing countries can however only be properly appreciated if one also recognises microstates as closed worlds (Vilamari 1977, p. 2). They approximate totalitarian institutions. Communication between insider and outsider is relatively scant; escape routes are shut; a stifling, claustrophobic, psycho-social environment settles in where members' every movement is scrutinised (Wallace 1973, pp. 1-2). Social and economic relationships are concentrated among fewer contacts. Intimacy is difficult to avoid, privacy difficult to defend. An entirely separate social universe defines the inhabitants' social status, their relationship to all others, their very identity. The
clearly bounded space, the circumscribing aquatic boundary, especially in islands, enables a resort to concepts of social behavior emergent from the study of prisons, hospitals, asylums, shipwrecked communities and interestingly, ships at sea.

It may prove theoretically insightful to approach generally the distinctiveness of a microstate labour policy from the twinning of these two diametrically opposed features: System openness and world closure. This is carried out by teasing out the strands of these two dynamics inherent in the vulnerability and panopticism of the tossed vessel metaphor, within the disaggregated spheres of policy formulation, policy transmission and policy contestation in action. Each of these spheres can therefore be construed as the site of a particular ensemble of tensions which suggest themselves as distinct in degree and in kind to microstates and, plausibly, to other small, autonomous territories.

Policy Effects

(a) Policy Formulation

Planning for structural change is important in small, open economies just as it is for larger, less open ones. But, while such plans may be easier to formulate in microstates, they may prove harder to implement (Demas 1985, p. 149). The machinery of economic management may be rudimentary, information scanty or unreliable, staffing precarious or untrained, decisions taken strongly affected by individual or group sympathies or antipathies (De Kadt 1979, p. 22). Partly for these reasons, the policy process may be unstructured and unpredictable (Worrell 1987, pp. 163-4). One ought not fail to appreciate that effective planning in small states calls for a recognition of the fragility of planning assumptions. These must be susceptible to quick alterations, in bold admission of the openness of the system and the unstoppable domino effect with which even modest exogenous change impacts and influences, totally and rapidly, most internal system parameters.

Such events need not be confined to spectacular ones like a hurricane or an epidemic: The departure or arrival of a few migrants, short-term global warning, even the loss of one, discrete individual could have a catastrophic effect:

The loss of one individual could constitute an irreparable loss because on non-substitutability.

-Bennell & Oxenham (1983, p. 31).

The task of the planners may boil down, in practice, to an unceremonious exercise in tea leaf reading (Higgins 1987, p. 145). But this inevitable contingent and indicative nature of any planning initiatives is regrettably often perceived as a lack of seriousness and amateurism. Planners are too often prone to retreat, hurt and embarrassed, into their corners and adopting a do or die position of refusing to review or alter their plans, as if their career and reputation are at stake - as indeed, they may truly be. Planners and politicians have nurtured a halo effect on plans and other policy instruments, such that they have mystically assumed the status of dogmatic, infallible predictions which then lead to damaging results when jolted by exogenous events, (Allan 1980, p. 394). The panoply of policy artifacts - plans, departments, councils, authorities - which may work effectively elsewhere, are just as likely to flourish but not to function (Brewster 1973, p. 94). Their rationale may be merely symbolic rather than economic and political (Sutton 1984, p. 50). Their physical presence is projected as the living symbol that governments govern - and therefore serve as a source of self-esteem to their officials and citizenry as well as evidence that the state, albeit a micro one, merits being taken seriously by other actors - so much substantial largesse may depend on this acknowledgement (Rosenau 1983, pp. 25-6). The mirage of planned development may nevertheless contribute to diplomatic and economic spinoffs which permit the achievement and perseverance of a "pampered periphery" (Báyús-Smith et. al. 1988, p. 289).
(b) Policy Operationalisation

The unregulated nature of assorted imports into such a highly articulated and interrelated social system is bound to lead to significant structural accommodations. Booms and troughs characterise the local economy, but their timing and duration defy prognostication. Even when local planners determine, with some degree of control, the pace and impact of local development, they apparently give scant consideration to the invariable social impact on the labour market. The smaller the national labour market, the higher the frictions to be expected from new demands. There will be unprecedented strains on the local labour supply, whether it is building a hotel or an airstrip, manning a factory or a container terminal (Lowenthal 1972, pp. 213-7; 1987, p. 36).

"The closure or opening of one business may alter the demand in one particular specialism by 50 or even 100 per cent" - Jeffcock 1978, p. 37.

People with the requisite skills, already a minority, will find themselves suddenly in great demand. The higher educational system may gear itself solidly towards the preferential provision of these needed (or presumed to be needed in the near future?) specialists. Foreign capital may set the existence of a labour skill pool as a precondition for setting up shop (and passing on to the microstate the main costs of training its workforce). The gap may be filled by expatriates or by returned migrants causing demographic disequilibria; and the appeal of relatively higher wages may entice occupational displacements in various spheres of the local economy. But, the nature of smallness being what it is, first the market is soon inundated with specialists; then, as the development project is concluded or foreign capital relocates (at the end of its tax holiday?), the demand disappears as suddenly as it had emerged. The start and finish of a couple of major building or staffing projects thus produces a shortage and a glut of labour respectively. Seasonal industries, as could be tourism and plantation agriculture, tend towards the same cyclical, albeit more predictable, pattern. Boom and bust waves become a feature of the labour scenario as the country, in typical, but unadmitted, crisis management style, invests first in one skill, then another, successively and contemporaneously, leaving in its wake an assorted collection of specialists. The trend, if it may be called so, is enhanced by the pressure to come up with new projects (rather than better use being made of existing ones) which meet the appeals of foreign aid/loan providers. The main concern of [wo]manpower policy thus consists, first, in producing the professionals with the right skills at the right time and, next, in hopefully providing employment for them by hopping from one project to another (Knapman 1986, p. 151).

So one is here faced with a paradox: much advice recommends that microstates should invest in [wo]manpower differentiation and segmentation, policies which are deemed essential for the proliferation of trades and professions as well as for the expansion of the local productive sector (Ward 1975, p. 120). Specialists labour is hailed as one major bottleneck to removed In the frantic drive for development. In so doing, microstates adhere to the specialisations entered into by much larger societies. There seems to be evident a formal unwillingness to accept the implications of smallness - that it may prove more worthwhile and less damaging to reformulate doctrines (originating in larger contexts) to fit the practice - rather than doggedly trying to fit the practice to the doctrines.

So many resources, particularly through the educational system, go towards the training of specialists. Yet, microstate practice readily indicates that [wo]manpower had best develop a "polyvalent handyman" personality (Bennell & Oxenham 1983, p. 24): utilising specialisation and diversification concurrently in the face of
uncertainty (Brookfield 1975, p. 71). The typical yet successful microstate producer is a jack or jill of many trades and master of sorts of all, even though he/she may have had little formal training in any (Shaw 1982, p. 98).

There is after all much less room for specialisation at the individual level in a microstate. Even should specialist services be required, there is usually not enough work for an individual to earn a living through a specialisation alone. This may mean that a small territory must train and pay a specialist for performing only very few services each year, or must otherwise import an expatriate specialist at considerable expense whenever one is needed (and forever hoping that one is available at the critical time). One other alternative - the regionalisation of specialist techniques - could pose considerable political, linguistic and logistic difficulties. The most likely outcome therefore, is that the specialist post is indigenised - serving at the same time as a source of national pride - but the incumbent is forced, not least to (the containment of costs, to practise "occupational multiplicity" (Wilson 1979, p. 219):

Small islands certainly need the best. But in small countries, the best may sometimes be defined in terms of flexibility and breadth rather than depth - (Bray 1982, p. 31)

(c) Policy Contestation in Practice

Microstate labour is the living example of how to manage, and be managed by, the circumstances of living with smallness. Here enters into play the process of policy negotiation and contestation. Workers become naturally adept at carving out enough room for manoeuvre which somehow ensures their dignified survival. Personalisation, networking, role diffusion and particularism, role multiplicity and occupational pluralism at home and abroad, in the formal, subsistence or informal economy, as well as collective mobilisation are potential, key shrewd "insurance" tactics which, as played out and as reacted to by other interests, could amount to the peculiarity of a microstate labour policy. The tactics help to widen and maintain access to limited prized resources, often in competition to other individuals or groups in society, such resources being themselves precarious, responding epiphenomenally to external events beyond even token influence. The microstate producer, not surprisingly, becomes capable not only of wearing many hats (May & Tupouniuia 1980, p. 428); but, more crucially, of wearing the right hat for the right occasion (Bertram & Watters 1985, pp. 515-6). Specialisation, while risky and precarious, carries lucrative benefits when in demand - there is a greater potential of carving out a specialised niche for oneself in the small local market - by obtaining monopolistic control over an area of production, skill, service or clientele.

Smallness can also be a major stimulus because, in a small country, it is easy to hit the limelight - (Bray & Fergus 1986, p. 94.)

But when the demand recedes, the producer must be ready to move on, slipping on another hat from the wardrobe. A similar versatility is evident in the way the microstate citizen slips easily from traditional to modern behavior, invoking traditional or modern codes of conduct as the situation requires. Labour, individually or in one of various levels of collectivity, somehow judges, within the perceived limited spectrum of possibilities, the relative merits of wearing different hats.

The condition is one which appears permanently transitional, with mixed modes of production; a mélange of neo-traditional, bureaucratic, capitalist, mercantile and parasitic patterns of survival. A spontaneous flexibility and entrepreneurship; a continuous and resilient adaptation which can be selectively conservative and opportunistic, groomed as it is by a colonial exposure, possibly itself distinct in its thorough penetration of the local society.
condition which results somewhat half way between conscious, spontaneous and sovereign initiative, and the acquiescence to an externally imposed political economy. It is perhaps best understood as a negotiated, often unconscious, not always successful, articulation and adjustment to both domestic and external forces.

Conclusion

Smallness, along with the economic and historical legacy of colonialism, may have doomed developing microstates to perpetual dependence. At least smallness gives them all one important comparative advantage - they offer themselves as lesser liabilities, more tolerable parasites, to would be sponsors. They therefore increase their chances of clinching a profitable annexation with a protective, larger patron in a harshly competitive world which otherwise offers no rosy futures.

The best solution for small territories is to look for some form of integration with their neighbours - (Benedict 1967, p. 8.)

As with small vessels set adrift, the best one could hope for is to be rescued and taken in tow by a larger vessel. This suggests another dilemma - that between cooption and self-determination. This is paramount on the agenda of most small territories today, independent and otherwise, in having to choose whether, and by how much, to forfeit political autonomy for the sake of securing economic livelihood...when the choice is available. The crew, meanwhile, goes about its tasks, partly in response to captain's orders, partly in trying to best deal with their perilous circumstances. The analysis of these dynamics is not new (e.g. Streiten 1993); but the metaphor lends itself readily as a novel, anchoring concept.  

Footnotes

1. HMS Ascension and HMS Atlantic Isle (Tristan da Cunha) are examples


5. Dommelen (1979, p. 2); Selwyn (1978); Ward (1967, pp. 81-82).

6. The classic study on total institutions is Goffman (1961); see also Foucault (1979).

7. Connell (1989, p. 25) criticises the negative implication of looking at some microstates as being peopled by a skeleton crew.


10. For example, the annual migration of a few hundred Seychellois over the period 1960-70 led to a significant shift in the country's racial composition - Wilson (1979, p. 211). The entry into the Bahamas of a few thousand Haitians was reported as "an invasion" and "a flood" by the Bahamanian press. Marshall (1981, pp. 107-8).


13. See, for example, Kelly (1986) on survival strategies by St. Lucian workers.

14. Carnegie (1982, p. 10) refers to the flexibility of "adjusting rapidly to whatever comes along". Kelly (1986, p. 832) identifies a similar building
of multiple options. See also Lowenthal (1972, p. 319) and Bayliss-Smith et. al. (1988, pp. 205-6). Hintjens (1991, p. 38) has argued that colonial penetration was generally more thorough and total on small islands - if anything because there was no hinterland for the indigenes to retreat to.

15. "Small size may be an advantage in the eyes of donors, presenting tangible objectives for a relatively limited financial outlay" - Lemon (1987, p. 167); See also Baldacchino (1993).


17. Ramphal (1994, p. 371) Today, the world's smallest territories indeed cling tenaciously to their colonial status. Other small states opted for independence only after an integration proposal had fallen through - Malta and Mauritius are cases in point. Integration was for a time also being entertained for the Seychelles and Gibraltar. Former French insular colonies have been more successful in this respect.

18. Observe, for example, the acrimonious local debated about Malta and its relationship with the EC, Puerto Rico and its "commonwealth" status with the United States, the negotiation of dependence by Tokelau, Norfolk Island, Niue and the Cook Islands with Australia and New Zealand, the relationship of France with its overseas departments, the "independence issue - or non-issue" in Aruba and Bermuda.

19. The author, a microstate citizen, is developing insights into labour policy and human resource management practices via emergent theorization on the basis of comparative fieldwork in Malta and Barbados.

Bibliography


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