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**POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE RELATIONSHIPS  
IN SMALL STATES**

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# POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN SMALL STATES

## Abstract

This paper analyses the nature, intensiveness and closeness of the relationship between the politicians and career civil servants with respect to the execution of their respective functions. The paper pays particular attention to different perceptions of the "State" and "Government" in comparative perspective, and tries to establish a link between those different perceptions and the nature of the civil service system in small jurisdictions. The paper also analyses the applicability of Leemans' "methodology" of local government to small states. The paper argues that this methodology can sometimes help in understanding the problems of small communities, but cannot be directly applied to small states. Finally, the paper looks at the different existing models of politico administrative relations, and assesses whether they can be applied to small states.

## Introduction

The problems of small states have attracted the attention of scholars and practitioners mainly since the 1960s when the vast majority of today's small states gained their independence from the former colonial powers. Small jurisdictions are not only small in territorial size and/or population, but also experience many problems in their economic development, human resources management, efficiency and effectiveness of the civil service systems. In recent years, the political vulnerability of small states emerged as a major problem (Commonwealth Advisory Group, 1997). While in the 1970s the focus of attention was on development (especially economic development) issues, currently there are many works dealing with the security problems of small states and their relative power in international relations (Goetschel, 1998). The problem of economies of scale in public administration design was also noticed and addressed (Baker, 1992).

Creating a new public administration system, reforming the remnants of the colonial civil service, and defining a new public policy agenda can be an overwhelming task for a nascent independent state. While the colonial civil service was externally imposed (by the former colonial power), the newly created national civil service has to be the expression of domestic conditions, societal cultures, and national expectations. Undoubtedly, the local milieu is an important factor for public policy formulation and execution. The relationship between the professional civil service and elected politicians is crucial for the definition of the political regime and the efficiency of the civil service. Although there are claims that some civil service systems are, by definition, apolitical (HC 92-II), the politicisation of the Public Administration is impossible to avoid. The issue is not whether, but to what extent, is the civil service system depoliticised. In a small state the politicisation can have even wider implications, as it is usually accompanied by nepotism (due to small population), protégé and close-knit group promotion practice. Therefore, the question of depoliticisation, professionalism and the introduction of wider accountability and responsibility of the civil service in small states warrant investigation. This paper argues that the performance of the civil service in small states can be improved if the service is depoliticised.

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## 'Small' Country Size and the Civil Service

Although the relative problem of size has been attracting scholars since the early development of the theory of the state, there were doubts as to whether small' deserve particular attention (see, for instance Baehr, 1974, Christmas-Moeller, 1983). In the theory of international relations, the problem of small states was connected with the problem of relative power, power being understood as an ability to influence another state's behaviour, or to prevent another from influencing one's own behaviour and actions. Usually, power was connected with the size of territory, population or economic strength.

The issue of size in the theory of public administration has often been regarded as unimportant (Murray, 1981), although small state scholars would emphasise that economies of scale constraints apply to public administration as well to all other areas of social life. Due to their limited natural resources endowments, small states tend to have fewer options than larger ones. In addition they tend to have a relatively small number of players (Bray, 1991). In spite of this, many small states import models of the civil service from former colonial powers, downsized to fit the smaller territory. Technical downsizing often is not followed by the necessary reorganisation or the redefinition of functional relationships. Pure technical reduction in size of the civil service is likely to create difficulties, affecting the quality of the service.

## Culture and Politico-Administrative Models

Despite our usual perception of the civil service as a monolith structure, its characteristics, texture and operating principles and procedures may vary significantly from one country to another. The nature of the politician-civil servant relationship may change due to changes in the dominant political ideology of the time or major changes in the political leadership. Therefore, the very nature of interactions between the political sector and (public) administration is influenced by many variables which range from a political-administrative culture in a country to various sector specific properties.

A brief cross-country comparison shows that two adverse processes are at work. In some countries, there is increasing political control over public administration to ensure that the bureaucracy adopts the new political signals; while in others, there appears to be a relaxation of political control in order to enable the public administration to adapt to external changes by virtue of its organisational capacities.

There is also a trend of the increasing influence of civil society on the overall political system in a country. Undoubtedly, some macroeconomic structural changes (primarily privatisation) that sustain the role and influence of the market (and vice versa) caused a relaxation of the political steering and control of the public administration. Here we refer the appearance of the "New Right" (Bosanquet, 1983; King, 1987; Pollitt, 1993, etc.) both in theoretical thought and in practice (e.g. the Baroness Thatcher years in the UK, 1979-1990, and Reaganomics in the USA).

1. The issue of what factors should be considered to define a state as a small one has been debated in the literature (See Commonwealth Secretariat, 1997: 8-9). Many authors consider a state as being small if its population is around one million or less.

## Models of the Civil Service

Theoretically the civil service systems can be classified into five groups (Peters, 1984; 1988). A number of authors support this division making some other, usually minor changes (Rose, 1987). In the first model the clear separation between politicians and administration exists, in which the civil servants are ready to unquestioningly follow the orders of the political appointees. The second model (called "village life") assumes that civil servants and politicians are both part of a unified state elite and that they should not be in conflict over power within the government structure itself. The third model (called "functional village life") assumes some degree of integration in civil service and political careers. A politician and a civil servant from one government department have more in common than a minister with his political cabinet colleagues heading different governmental portfolios. The fourth model (named "adverse model") assumes a significant separation between the two groups (politicians and bureaucrats), but also there is no clear resolution in their struggle for power. The fifth model assumes the clear separation between policymakers and administration, where, however, civil servants are the dominant force (see Wilson, 1975). All these models are rather theoretical, and practice by itself shows different patterns of interaction between politicians and civil service. Models represent, as usual, a stylized illustration of inter-active behaviour (see Giddens, 1971).

"Functional village life" and "village life" are the most common models for the continental European practice. However, with some policy changes in a presidential system, there appear different ways of networking between politicians, public servants and experts working outside the government structure. The nature of such networking is rather temporary, and the main characteristics of the civil service system prevail. This shows that every particular civil service system is primarily "nationally coloured" (Sevic, 1997), and "ethos-generated" characteristics cannot be neglected or avoided. Each country deals with its own national civil service system and tries to utilise another country's experiences, but not neglecting its own specifics demonstrated through the legal system and legal order (Sevic, 1996), political culture, democratic traditions (or lack of the same), and ethos-characteristics. The same applies to the particular problem of civil service system (de)politicisation.

The relationship between politicians and the civil servants is regulated by law, although in countries with long traditions of an independent civil service, informal rules play an important role. In recent years, political culture and attitudes have been given importance when analysing the politico-administrative relationship. From surveys of population (citizens, voters) one can gauge the opinion of the public and their attitudes towards the civil service. Often in countries of continental European traditions, the general public makes a clear distinction between the Government and the civil service. Government is perceived as a collective body consisting of politicians, and therefore is time limited, while the civil service is perceived as an embodiment of the state itself. Often politicians in such systems can try to use the civil service for their political purposes and shift the responsibility focus from themselves onto the service. Social attitudes towards the civil service influence recruitment policies and the overall identity of the service.

An analysis of the policy process is important for an overall understanding of the relationship between politicians and the civil servants. As we have seen, in socially responsible settings, the civil service can have much more power over the technical side of the policy implementation. Through "whistleblower" powers it can identify practices which are inefficient or illegal, and it is possible to expect an intervention of legislative or judiciary powers to correct the situation. Often, the civil service is involved in the process of preparing drafts of legal acts can disclose in all their richness the variety of different policy procedures and practices. Inter-ministry co-ordination and exercise of administrative powers by the minister in this process can disclose to what extent the government of the day is perceiving the civil service as a policy instrument.

Often, even in the most democratic countries, the public is regularly informed that the government of the day has crossed the line and over politicised the civil service for the purposes of short-term gain and daily political use.

Ferrel Heady (1996) developed a model which in many ways complement the already mentioned Peters' model. Heady studies the relationship of the civil service with the political regime, finding that the civil service can be ruler responsive, single party responsive, majority party responsive and military responsive. Also, the socio-economic context influences the relationship. The civil service can operate in traditional, pluralist competitive, mixed, corporatist and centrally planned socio-economic environments. Focusing on personnel management, he concluded that different civil service systems can apply the following models: chief executive, independent agency, divided and ministry-by-ministry. Determining the quality of the entrance requirements, the civil service system can promote any of the following: patrimony, party loyalty, party patronage, professional performance, and bureaucratic determination. Being a social organisation the civil service must have a sense of mission. Sense of mission is shared within the service and can be: compliance, cooperation, policy responsiveness, constitutional responsiveness and guidance. Using the model and taking into account all policy variables would enable us to determine the nature of the politico-administrative relationship in different civil service systems.

Morgan developed another model. He began with classifying the states into integral, patrimonial, and custodial. In an integral state the civil service is supposed to behave as a secular, rational policy instrument in the delivery of 'development' through government agencies or stateowned enterprises (Morgan, 1996: 230). The patrimonial state is in fact a less effective integral state caught in the trap of a 'clientele effect' (clan, ethnic, religious, territorial and other segregation and/or favouritism). In the custodial state, the civil service has been seen as a protector of the very idea of state as a social institution. The civil service provides eternal stability in fairly unstable political conditions. Morgan also analysed the level of institutionalisation of nation-state, assuming that the civil service can be anti-state, pro-state, institutional state and inchoate state. Analysing the degree of professionalism, he related value of process and value of outcomes with professionalism and political responsiveness. Combining all these one gets four quadrants which should cover all the existing civil service systems. According to Morgan the first quadrant is the pragmatic field, the second is the patrimonial field, while the third is the positivist field and finally, the fourth is the absolutist field.

### **Applicability of Civil Service Models to Small States**

Because of the historical connections with the former colonial powers, small states imported models from the larger territories. However, due to specific historical developments and underlying cultures after independence all these countries modified their civil service systems to some extent (at least cosmetically). In such states, group, clan, tribal and other similar micro-interests dominate the policy process. The models discussed above have therefore to be seen in the context of the social and cultural realities of these states.

Some small states have retained structures from those existing under colonial regimes (for instance, Malta), with a high degree of impartiality and professionalism. Size related factors however remains a problem for the civil service in all small states.

Although smaller societies are usually very cohesive and co-operative, it does not follow that there are no other conflicts. In a civil service where everyone knows everybody, it is difficult to perform professional duties in an unbiased way, as every public action will be examined through the prism of group interests. Belonging to a village or a clan is important for the success in both politics and a civil service career. Informal rules outside the civil service influence the processes within the service more in small states than in larger jurisdictions.

A civil servant is usually seen as 'our man in...' and therefore he/she is obliged to assist his/her tribesmen, members of the clan, village, etc. It is difficult to distance oneself from the place of origin and to develop a professional, independent policy stance. In a similar way the bond between politicians and civil servants is developed, adding to all the problems already mentioned.

### **Importation of Inappropriate Models**

Practice has shown that some small states kept for a while and almost unchanged, former colonial public administration. This is a very unfortunate solution. The colonial civil service was designed to keep public order and to enforce law in such a way as to facilitate the colonial rule. Colonial civil service was not there to serve the local population or to protect the interests of a colony as such. In history there were cases where the colonial civil servants were more responsible than was required in protecting the possible interests of the local community, but this was the exception rather than the rule.

The public administration in small countries is often faced with the problem as to how it can efficiently enforce the law on all its territory, due to its small size. This is the situation especially with some countries which have large territory in relation to the size of population (for instance Botswana). Scarce resources and low levels of development can be projected onto the civil service as well, as the country will experience a problem as to how to finance the civil service and its regular activities. The problem is made worse due to the fact that small states tend to have limited human capital, a condition often exacerbated as a result of brain-drains.

Small size and limited resources require very careful management and clear introduction of strategic management (especially strategic planning). Consequently this requires an appropriate performance measurement system (Sevic and Rabrenovic, 2000). Small countries often have over-extended personnel, small spare or reserve capacity, limited number of experts (and often possessing skills that are not as necessary in a small country context), inappropriate training, and low job satisfaction. If addressed properly, these problems can turn into opportunities for further development if administrative reform involves the development of a pool of trained personnel and the development of a local base of experts. This will initiate further changes throughout the system, like concentric circles.

Public Administration theory emphasises the importance of a 'critical mass' concept applied to personnel development (Baker, 1992). According to this argument, a small country must develop the minimum pool of knowledge and skills to make the necessary impact on social development. This is a specific application of the 'concentric circles' concept of public service reform diffusion. However, it is a problem as to how to keep trained personnel working in the country, especially when they acquire advanced skills and become internationally competitive. This represents one side of the problem.

### **Relationship between Civil Servants and Citizens**

Another problem is that due to the country's small size, civil servants work with people that they more or less know. Often a client is a relative, friend, or neighbour. The problem of close-knit network is very difficult to overcome, due to the limitations of smallness.

In a large state, the civil service may hide behind the faceless execution of laws. A civil servant is just part of the larger mechanism of law enforcement. A civil servant in a small state has in fact a position similar to a local government official. Everyone knows who applied the law, and the official action is seen with more human eyes. The civil servant action is perceived more in a personal than in an official capacity. Personalisation of an official relationship cannot be avoided in small states. In a large jurisdiction, belonging to the civil service usually carries some weight, since a civil service career, as a rule, is perceived as socially prestigious. In a small state, belonging to particular tribe, or other defined social group, is much more important than membership of the civil service. Often tribal relations are projected onto the relational network in the civil service. This can make public action socially supported, but can also affect the efficiency and effectiveness of the civil service.

### **Relationship between Civil Servants and Politicians**

Smallness influences not only the relationship between the civil service and citizens, but also the relationship between elected politicians and career civil servants. Politicians are usually those who by definition should represent well-defined interests and, through an efficient bargaining process, should ensure that the public interest is served.

In a small state, the prevalence of local and group interests dominate political life. Practice has shown that it is very difficult to introduce the concept of "greater purpose" or "national interests". Small local interests dominate the national political scene in a small country. Often the necessary level of co-operation can be achieved only when the country negotiates with an outsider, but even then not always. To some extent this practice is a remnant of the past, when these countries were ruled by colonial powers. In order to maintain the order necessary to extract resources and protect colonial interests, the colonisers fragmented the local political scene and creating many, often artificial, differences, following an old Roman maxim "divide and rule".

The colonial heritage also seriously influenced the design of the politico administrative relationships. In colonial times the colonies generally had no political function. Politics was performed in the metropolis, while the execution of basic laws was entrusted to local civil service (better referred to as 'Colonial Service'). Colonial service ruled a dependent territory interested only in maintaining law and order and preventing any outbreak of social unrest. With independence, the basic structure of colonial service was transformed, or often just re-named into the national civil service, with a noticeable change only at the very top. Senior colonial civil servants were replaced by the locals, and leading crown appointed officials were replaced by elected politicians in the vast majority of cases.

The colonial powers usually tried to group some of the public administration activities for a number of dependent territories in order to reap economies of scale. After independence, many of these actions were regarded somewhat *constraining*. Independence was usually accompanied by rising nationalism and the necessity to create as many national institutions as possible. In the transition process, the whole structure of the former colonial service was kept, and changed gradually over time, not always for the better. However, dissembling the common institutions is a very costly exercise. Therefore, the new independent small states suffered and many still do, from problems in planning, financing, staffing and operating their governments due to the small scale on which administrative activities are carried out (UNITAR, 1971:149).

Small states are often pushed to organise public service structures similar to those of larger states. This costly exercise however does not guarantee success. The public sector of many small states offers a wide range of services which can be, and usually are excessive given the limited resources. The call for a size and organisational structure which is compatible with a country's economic potential and social abilities is often ignored. A civil service structure, copied from larger countries, requires significant co-ordination efforts, which tend to be deficient in small states. Often the means of co-ordination previously existing under colonial times do not remain in place, and are too expensive to be established.

Politico-administrative relationships in small states are therefore burdened not only with constraints relating to economies of scale, but also with the tradition derived from the former colonial service, the presence of a close-knit social relationships, the exercise of tribal and local patriotic interests present at the state level. In a case like this, it can be questioned whether existing models of politico-administrative relationships can operate effectively, and whether it is necessary to create a hybrid model combining the politico-administrative relationships at the national and at local government levels.

## Conclusion

In the modern theory of Public Administration, the relationship between politicians (or political appointees) and professional, career civil servants has recently attracted particular attention. The fall of the Berlin Wall and disappearance of communist regimes in Central and Eastern European Countries has stimulated further interest in this matter. Only an independent and professional civil service can meet the expectations of an increasingly demanding citizen, which more and more often perceives his/herself as a tax-paying customer, and therefore expects a good service.

Small states, as a rule, inherited the basic civil service structure from their colonising powers. Although the main scope of the service changed with independence, in many cases the colonial structure has been preserved. Due to their size, small states face special problems in having a professional and impartial civil service, a problem made worse by economies of scale constraints. The small size of the service means that

everyone will know everyone, and unavoidably national divisions will be noticeable in the civil service as well. The main problem is as to how to define and control the influence of local influences.

Some authors propose the application of models of local government to small states. However, local government would be interested in local issues, whereas the government of small states is also involved with national (central government) issues. Even Leemans' classification (Leemans, 1970) of underlying 'dual', 'fused' and 'split hierarchy' models cannot be applied in the case of small jurisdictions. All three models assume some kind of relationship between the local government and the central authorities. But small states have no two- or three-tier government. The central government is at the same time local government, and local politics becomes national level politics.

The existing models of politico-administrative relationship, generally devised for large states with significant resources, are not therefore necessarily applicable to small states. The redefinition of the relationship of smaller social groups (clans, tribes, etc.) and their members who are currently in the civil service must be considered in this regard.

Opening the public policy process and widening social participation in small states can promote the development of a professional civil service and the establishment of career civil servants, especially at senior level. In order to make this effective, special contractual relations must be developed to reduce the brain drain. While big countries usually have enough resources and can afford to make mistakes, small states do not have such a luxury.

The only solution for improving the service does not lie in the importation of foreign models, but in the more efficient and effective use of existing resources, and this is the reason why clearing up the relationship between the political appointees and professional (career) civil servants is of crucial importance.

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