

The dilemmas of organisational capacity

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Leadership is not the answer. We are asking the wrong question.

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Capacity: Capabilities and Competences in Policy-Making. (M. Howlett, M. Ramesh
and Wu Xun (eds)

Abstract

For forty years public sector reformers have lamented the lack of ‘leadership skills’ in career bureaucracies. They have brought successive waves of change aimed at making the public service more efficient, agile and responsive. An extensive scholarly literature acknowledges the problematic nature of ‘leadership’ in a public sector context – the difficulties inherent to a model premised on responsibility and accountability being shared by elected and career officials. But these insights seem lost on politicians, whose efforts to exert greater control over career officials have brought a range of unintended consequences, mainly because management reforms do not recognise the primacy of politics, nor the stewardship obligations of public sector leaders. In this article, I argue that ambiguities in the roles, responsibilities and relationships between ministers and senior officials must be addressed as a prerequisite for reform. A reimagined partnership between elected and unelected officials is essential to improve policy capacity.

Keywords

Policy capacity; political leadership; bureaucratic leadership; public sector reform.

Introduction

An extensive scholarly literature acknowledges the problematic, contextual and contingent nature of leadership. Cronin and Genovese (2012, ix) see leadership as ‘a series of dilemmas, choices and paradoxes that challenge leaders in every sector. Clashing expectations and demands, and unexpected occurrences must be regularly confronted and dealt with’. Similarly, reflecting their survey of the ‘puzzles’ of political leadership, ‘tHart and Rhodes (2014, x) conclude it ‘is a somewhat bewildering enterprise because there is no unified theory of leadership.¹ There are too many definitions, and too many theories in too many disciplines. We do not agree on the meaning of leadership, on how to study it, or even why we study it’.

Notwithstanding this absence of conceptual and analytical clarity (see, for example, Peters and Helms 2012), public sector reformers consistently lament the lack of ‘leadership’ skills in career bureaucracies. Like that other Holy Grail, coordination, ‘leadership’ is the panacea reformers believe will resolve a litany of problems - both real and perceived. For forty years they have brought successive waves of change aimed at making the public service more efficient, more agile and responsive. The term ‘leadership’ is frequently invoked, but better management is really what is being sought. Across different types of political systems, the focus is on management and the technical skills it is believed will help to improve the delivery of public policies (Chapman and O’Toole 2010, 132; Rhodes 2014).

¹ Cronin and Genovese (2012, 35) concur that despite the impressive writings of theorists from Plato to James MacGregor Burns, ‘no grand, unifying theory of leadership exists. One may never exist’. A great deal is known about leadership, but like Rhodes and ‘tHart, these authors conclude it is better understood as puzzle or paradox, because of the competing and sometimes contradictory demands on leaders in different situations, cultures and contexts.

This primarily managerial emphasis is reflected in the literature on policy capacity, which Howlett and Ramesh (2014, 9-10) define as ‘the preconditions a government requires in order to make sound policy choices and implement them effectively in achieving its potential to steer a governance mode’. In the Introduction to this Special Issue, Howlett, Ramesh and Wu (2015, 1-2) argue that ‘policy capacity at its core is a function of three sets of skills and three sets of resources. The three critical skills essential for policy success are political, managerial and analytical. These skills need to be matched by critical resources at three levels: systemic, organizational and individual’. Leadership – however defined, is inherent to the political skills that, the editors argue, ‘form the arch-stone on which other skills rest’. It is critical too to the managerial skills needed to get things done in the complex and contested terrain of contemporary governance.

Howlett and Ramesh (2014, 21) acknowledge ‘the unclear division of responsibilities between elected and appointed officials makes it difficult for the latter to exercise leadership’. They argue ‘These barriers need to be comprehended and addressed if leadership is to improve and this element of policy capacity enhanced’. They note the critical importance of relationships, but default to a primarily managerial focus, thus obscuring a more fundamental dilemma: the contested and inherently political nature of public leadership and the tensions inherent to a model premised on responsibility and accountability being shared by elected and career officials (see, for example, Peters and Helms 2012; ‘tHart 2014).

In this article I use a case from Britain to highlight the flaws inherent to the specific and narrow understanding of ‘leadership’ that is implicit to Civil Service reforms being proposed and implemented there, but which follow trends evident

elsewhere. I follow Rhodes' (2014, 12) suggestion that when considering reform, it is important to ask which civil servants we are talking about. He distinguishes three possible occupational groups: the political-administrators at the heads of departments; the service delivery managers; and the front office staff, and highlights the different skills that each group employs. My focus here is the political-administrators, the most senior public servants, since they face uniquely complex leadership responsibilities and because at the top of career bureaucracies, where many public sector reforms, including those currently underway in Britain have focused, politics is pervasive.

Public leadership of governance and policy-making has long been acknowledged as a collective endeavour. Success depends on effective partnerships between ministers and senior officials (see t'Hart 2014, 75-81). In this article, I argue that ambiguities in the roles, responsibilities and relationships between ministers and senior officials must be addressed as a prerequisite of public sector reform and improved policy capacity. After forty years of being absent from reform processes and debates, I argue it is time to focus on the leadership roles of ministers. I encourage reformist ministers to embrace a more humble approach to their shared leadership task.

The article and the case study on which it is based, uses methods drawn from the toolkit of interpretive political science. Interpretive approaches recognise the importance of meaning in the study of human life; they shift emphasis away from institutions, functions and roles towards the beliefs and practices of interdependent actors – to what people believe they are doing and why (Rhodes 2015). To understand actions and practices, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, the

beliefs and preferences of the people involved. An interpretive approach seeks to understand the webs of significance that people spin for themselves. Though often associated with political ethnography (see, for example, Rhodes 2011; Rhodes and Tiernan 2014, 2015), there are many ways of 'doing' interpretive political science (and for a review see Rhodes 2015). This article draws on first hand accounts and public statements to recover the meaning of 'leadership' as expressed by key protagonists on all sides of the continuing debate about Civil Service Reform in the United Kingdom.

Once more, and around again

David Cameron's July 2014 announcement that he would create a new position of Chief Executive of the United Kingdom's Civil Service raised eyebrows both within and outside Whitehall. According to the Prime Minister, the new Chief Executive 'will lead the next phase of civil service transformation and the government's efficiency and reform agenda'. Perhaps tellingly, the Prime Minister noted 'the Chief Executive will have a strong track record of delivering transformation in the private sector'. Permanent Secretaries who have trod the traditional path to the top of the Civil Service need not apply.

A more detailed rationale for the appointment is outlined in the *Civil Service Reform Plan – Progress Report*, issued by Minister for the Cabinet Office, Francis Maude and Sir Jeremy Heywood, Cabinet Secretary and newly-appointed Head of the Civil Service, in October 2014. In it, the Minister and Britain's most senior and influential civil servant assert the need to accelerate the reform program that commenced in 2012. While noting progress towards their goal of a Civil Service that is 'more skilled, less bureaucratic and hierarchical, and more unified', they argue:

In particular, it is apparent that insufficient change has been made to the culture of the Civil Service. Greater effort and stronger leadership is required [in key reform areas²] to deliver the culture of continuous improvement needed to deliver a modern organisation ready to tackle the challenges of the future (Civil Service Reform Plan Progress Report 2014, 1).

The Cameron Coalition government has had a difficult relationship with the British Civil Service. There has been significant turnover at the most senior levels. Reports suggest that at least some of these have been a consequence of personality clashes between ministers and officials; and prime ministerial and ministerial frustration with ‘performance’ in key areas. Ministers have questioned mandarins’ commitment to implementing sweeping changes arising from the government’s austerity program (see, for example, Ganesh 2014; Sylvester and Thomson 2014). Cabinet Office Minister Francis Maude, has been a persistent critic of the civil service’s responsiveness and dogged in his pursuit of measures to ensure ministers have access to advice and support from a broader range of sources (Civil Service Reform Plan Progress Report 2014, 19).

Frequent complaints from ministers about the performance of their departments and by implication, their Permanent Secretaries, have provoked former senior officials to speak out. Most recently, Sir Gus O’Donnell, who served as Cabinet Secretary from 2005-10, told an Australian audience he had ‘witnessed a debilitating deterioration in relationships between Ministers and Civil Servants in the UK since I left’ (O’Donnell 2014, 3). O’Donnell, Cabinet Secretary to Prime Ministers Gordon

² The *Civil Service Reform Plan* identified seven ‘game-changer priorities’. These are: A Civil Service for the 21st Century (CS21), Capabilities, Digital, Major Projects, Open Policy-Making, Functional Leadership and The Way We Work’. The 2014 *Civil Service Reform Plan Progress Report* details the original goals and assesses progress towards their achievement.

Brown and Tony Blair, has acknowledged previously that tensions between the Civil Service and the government are damaging the relationship. He laid responsibility for the situation squarely on ministers:

Where do you get a chief executive of a company standing up and saying the problem is with my workers? It reduces morale and effectiveness... it's morally wrong to blame the staff, but it's also intellectually flawed. It's not going to get you anywhere because the real problem lies elsewhere... The fundamental problem is the way we generate policy. If you go with gut instinct, things are not as good as they could be. I would like to have a proper process for generating evidence... but that is regarded by ministers as 'You're slowing it down, you're the road block to reform' (quoted in Sylvester and Thomson 2013).

Lord Turnbull, who preceded O'Donnell as Cabinet Secretary, shares concerns about 'the uneasy relationship' between ministers and officials and 'the tendency for ministers to publicly blame officials when things go wrong' (quoted in Sylvester and Thomson 2013). Turnbull's predecessor as Cabinet Secretary (now Lord of Brockwell), Robin Butler is similarly disconcerted. In an interview with the BBC, he criticised the conduct and behaviour of ministers, accusing them of 'unfairly dumping' on the civil service. Questioned about claims that senior ministers had provided 'private political briefings' critical of senior civil servants, Lord Butler continued:

I'm sorry to say, I really think that Mr Maude and some of his colleagues don't understand leadership. My view is that the relationship between ministers and the civil service works best when they work in a mutually supportive

relationship, with loyalty on both sides. Backstairs sniping, whichever side it comes from, shows that something is wrong (quoted in Wright 2013).

Something is indeed wrong in the relationship between elected and unelected officials. The British case cited here, provides merely the most recent example that in Westminster-style systems especially, the partnership between ministers and civil servants, long recognised as fundamental to the exercise of public leadership, is under pressure. In all four of the old dominion countries, a growing number of former politicians, senior officials, business leaders, scholars and others have called for a wide-ranging review of the Civil Service and the relationship between ministers and officials:

Although I think the civil service is in a better shape than I have seen it in over 30 years, I would say that clarifying the role of ministers and officials is the major unresolved constitutional question. It is a question that has been deliberately left untouched – the Pandora’s Box that now needs opening.

(Permanent Secretary, quoted in Lodge and Rogers 2006: 73).

Francis Maude for his part is unrepentant about the need for change. His approach, like his rhetoric, has been predictably top-down. The *Civil Service Reform Plan* and the 2014 *Progress Report* are a tangle of often naïve assumptions. Two particularly stand out. First is the belief that central government can assert direct authority over policy and service delivery. The rise of network governance and the many dependencies that characterise life at the centre have laid bare the limits of command and control. This insight, obvious to and well accepted by scholars, seems lost on politicians like Maude. Managing the mix of bureaucracy, markets and networks requires new skills (Needham, Mangan and Dickinson 2013) – meta-

governing, boundary spanning and collaborative leadership (Rhodes 2014, 8).

Managing complex, non-routine issues, policies and relationships inevitable necessitates delegation and 'letting go'. It is futile to cling to traditional hierarchy in a context where authority and responsibility are dispersed and distributed.

The second and in some ways more profoundly misplaced assumption is that management reform will resolve what is essentially a political-constitutional issue: the relationship between ministers and career officials; and senior officials' responsibility to ensure the public service maintains the capacity to serve current and future governments. Surveying the impact of 40 years of reform, Rhodes (2014, 11) concludes 'there is no agreement on either the stewardship role of the civil service or on the appropriate relationship between ministers and civil servants'.

A recent House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration report noted something similar. It found that the Cabinet Office's 'Civil Service Leadership Statement'³ makes no reference to the leadership role of ministers. Their absence from discussion of leadership is the elephant in the room of efforts to build policy capacity and achieve civil service reform. The Committee highlighted:

...two aspects of civil service leadership that are in tension with one another.

The first is the observation made by Civil Service CEO John Manzoni that 'the Civil Service requires confident leadership...' and 'a sense of being in control of their own destiny'. The second is that Civil Service leaders must subordinate their own leadership to that of the Minister, who has the final democratic

³ The statement, released in February 2015 highlights three key characteristics that civil servants have indicated they expect from effective leaders and that Civil Service Leaders promise to live up to. See:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-leadership-statement/civil-service-leadership-statement>

authority. Thus senior civil servants work in a context of 'dual leadership'. This makes Civil Service leadership complicated and potentially confusing (House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration 2015, 44).

Strains on the governing marriage

Westminster-style systems confer heroic expectations on the individuals selected to join the Cabinet at the apex of political power. Ministers are expected to perform a great variety of tasks across a spectrum that ranges from the purely political to policy and administration. Their challenge is to manage the mix of imperatives that accrue to them under the competing political and administrative traditions of Westminster (Tiernan and Weller 2010, 299-301).

All leadership has a relational dimension (see Cronin and Genovese 2012; 'tHart 2014), but this is especially true for public leaders, who exist within complex networks of dependency. Their dependencies have become more pronounced under network governance, where the work of governing: policy-making, implementation and even regulation, is undertaken through a diverse array of organisations. Governing effectively depends on the ability of ministers and senior officials, whose relationship is characterised by mutual dependency, to work together. The model was envisaged as a partnership, based on complementary skills and expertise ('tHart 2014). Thus politicians provided 'political leadership', while senior officials practiced 'administrative leadership' – which in Westminster style systems emphasised serving and supporting ministers (Mulgan 2010; Peters and Helms 2012). Bureaucrats are not leaders or public entrepreneurs in the manner of American 'execucrats'. Instead, their constitutional responsibility is to exercise the authority delegated to them by their political masters (House of Commons Select Committee on Public

Administration 2015; Terry 1995). Theakston (1999, 252) notes that:

Leadership is indeed a particularly problematic concept in a civil service setting (or any public bureaucracy) ... and indeed in one important sense at least appears to be a contradiction in terms, given the constitutional convention of ministerial responsibility and expectations of political control.

Public sector reforms, particularly those inspired by private sector models, have brought other contradictions. In demanding that public servants should innovate, take risks and exercise their discretion and judgement, reformers changed more than they perhaps intended:

What was not recognised or admitted was that the type of leadership demanded was no longer plainly bureaucratic. Like that of the senior officials of old, it had become inherently political, and was thus exposed to all the perils and uncertainties of the democratic realm. (Kane and Patapan 2006, 715).

In their quest to assert greater control over career bureaucracies, reformers have done much more than to blur the boundaries between politics and administration. At the same time as they sought to replace the traditional 'craft' skills of the mandarins with managerial skills (Rhodes 2014), they made the political dimension of administration – once the province of a small, highly experienced elite, the concern of and a key driver for, a far broader group of officials. For Kane and Patapan (2009, 132) this 'general avoidance or overlooking of the political dimension of administration defines the essence of the problem facing administrators as they attempt to graft the idea of leadership onto public governance generally'.

There have been unintended consequences for the relationship that was

assumed to exist between politicians and career officials. The boundary between politics and administration has become increasingly blurred as, politicians have sought to strengthen control over the political and administrative centre of government (Dahlstrom et al 2011, 12) by means including: the appointment of partisan advisers, contract employment for senior officials and demands for increased accountability, coordination and performance management. The 'administrative leadership' (Terry 1995; Theakston 1999) provided by the most senior officials has been complicated by ministerial demands for responsiveness and, relatedly, since they are the means by which responsiveness is achieved, by the emergence of partisan personal staff. Across Westminster-style systems, and in most significant numbers in Australia and Canada, staffers have become a third player within the traditionally bilateral relationship between ministers and officials (Tiernan 2007; Tiernan and Weller 2010). Political practice has outstripped constitutional theory and senior officials have been left to grapple with the dilemmas posed by haphazard ministerial incursions into areas traditionally the province of bureaucrats. Former Secretary of the Australian Department of Defence, Ric Smith, AO (2006, 8) noted the profundity of this change:

... Ministers have acquired the resources and capacity to reach further into the management of their agencies, and for reasons of perceived accountability want to do so. But – as a former senior colleague once put it – that risks their becoming the effective CEO, and Secretaries becoming in effect their Chief Operating Officers. If that becomes the case, then the respective accountabilities of Ministers and Secretaries may have to be changed in areas affected not only by convention but also by legislation.

Smith was pointing to a dilemma that has only intensified under the pressures of modern politics – whether it is any longer meaningful to distinguish political from administrative leadership. In the British context, Rhodes (2011) found that politicians and civil servants find the distinction between policy and management meaningless when confronted by the imperative to cope and survive. Every rude surprise demonstrates their mutual dependence. Their priority and their skills are about surviving in a world of ‘rude surprises’.

Coping and survival are the twin imperatives that confront the political-administrative elite (Rhodes 2011). The demands of political accountability and the media spotlight overwhelm their interest in and capacity for longer-term thinking and planning. The same holds true in Australia. Rhodes and Tiernan (2014) show that the boundaries that (at least in theory) once distinguished political from administrative leadership have dissolved, but there is neither consensus nor consistency of view about what now constitutes an appropriate demarcation of political-administrative role and responsibilities. For example, the 2010 Review of Australian Government Administration (the Moran Review) questioned whether the pendulum of responsiveness had swung too far in favour of ministers (Lindquist 2010; Mulgan 2010). The outgoing Australian Public Service Commissioner, Stephen Sedgwick (2014, 3) reflected recently that:

Today there is no doubt that the elected government sets the agenda and defines the national interest. And looking back over 30 years, it is clear the APS culture has changed to afford primacy to that reality. But, having successfully created a responsive, action-oriented culture, concerns emerged that the APS may have become too reactive, too focused on the short term and the delivery

of tasks, and unable to generate the range of new ideas that it might have liked...

... amendments to the Public Service Act introduced in 2013 were intended to clarify the leadership responsibilities of APS leaders. These leaders remain responsible for delivering the government's immediate agenda. In addition, APS leaders are required to develop the capability to provide forward-looking, creative contributions to government about what that agenda should be and to be stewards of an enduring institution who scan the horizon and build capability within their agency ahead of predictable need.

As this suggests, we need to reimagine the partnership between ministers and senior officials and recognise the capacities and skills that each brings to this crucial relationship. We need to acknowledge too, the tensions inherent to senior officials' unique responsibilities for 'stewardship' – their obligation to be responsive, while also preserving the ability of the bureaucracy to serve future governments. Perhaps ironically given how both they and the value of institutional memory have been devalued, the traditional craft skills of the senior bureaucrat, which Rhodes (2014, 12) identifies as including: counselling, stewardship, prudence, probity, judgement, diplomacy and political nous, assume renewed salience in this context. Leadership in the public service has been defined increasingly in managerial terms, but ministers still rely on the special expertise of the top mandarins 'to make the system work' (Theakston 1999).

Asking the right question

To date, however, public sector reform efforts have looked at only one side of the governing partnership. They have ignored the leadership roles of ministers and

particularly prime ministers, who exercise a decisive influence on policy capacity – in setting the tone for relationships among network actors; in shaping patterns of demand for analysis and advice; in establishing priorities and routines for policy-making; and establishing arenas and modes for decision-making – be it collective for a like Cabinet, or in smaller group contexts, often described as ministerial ‘courts’ (Rhodes and Tiernan 2014a).

Politicians have driven successive waves of reform, but they have been conspicuously absent from reviews and inquiries into the performance of the public sector. Legendary Australian mandarin Sir Arthur Tange noted in his 1981 Garran Oration that:

It is remarkable that the analyses, and the remedies for public service deficiencies, have seldom looked at ministers – what they are, their workloads and habits, their priorities... It is inexplicable that the Royal Commission [into Australian Government Administration (RCAGA)] directed to inquire into the ‘relationship of the Australian Public Service... with Parliament, Ministers and the community...’ specifically relieved itself from any analysis or recommendations on ministerial methods, and largely accepted the idealised textbook model of authority to which public servants may be capable of responding (Tange 1982, 1, 9-10).

Tange argued ‘the focus of investigations and recommendations concerning [public sector] reform has been too narrow. Changes recommended have been directed to some parts of a complex living constitutional organism without enough regard to the effect elsewhere in it’. He urged reformers to focus on ‘the total fabric and process of government’. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011, 181) argue similarly the

need to review ministers remaining a 'no-go' zone in debates about public sector reform. They ask 'Why it is usually assumed that it is the civil servants in need of reform, but not ministers or the other politicians who may hope to become ministers in due course?'

Ministerial office remains one of the last bastions of the amateur. Politics may be becoming more professional, but this has not translated to formal preparation for becoming a minister (Hartley 2014; Tiernan and Weller 2010). Although better educated and generally possessing more political experience, it is arguable contemporary Australian ministers are less well prepared to discharge their ministerial duties than their predecessors, who were older, were drawn from more diverse occupational backgrounds, career and life experiences and spent longer in parliament before their first appointment (Tiernan and Weller 2010). Ministers and ministerial staffers do most of their learning on the job. Lacking development pathways and institutional memory, their preparation draws on narratives and storytelling (Rhodes and Tiernan 2014a). It involves consulting colleagues and peers in their personal and professional networks, reading political biographies and drawing lessons from mentors and political heroes here and overseas (Tiernan and Weller 2010). But it has become increasingly uncommon for ministers to have experience outside politics and government, such as might equip them for the more hands-on roles they now seek to exercise.

It is perhaps not surprising then that a growing number of critics, including in the Australian context, from business and the private sector, blame ministers for what they perceive to be an obsession with short-term politics, a deterioration of

good policy processes and the growing influence of partisan advisers with ‘limited experience and even less expertise’. Chief Executive of the Business Council of Australia (BCA), Jennifer Westacott has been particularly strident. She argues that ministers have ‘lost sight of the fundamental role of the public service’ and warns that ‘many precious things’ about it risk being lost (Westacott 2012, 1). Outgoing Chief Executive of the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) John Colvin laments the rise of ‘political class’ arguing their lack of diversity and professional and commercial experience leaves them ill-equipped to manage complex economic and policy challenges. Former Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Terry Moran argues ministers need to be skilled in the ‘arts of governing’. According to Moran (2013, 2), these include:

- being good at political management and communication – which is not always straightforward given the complexities of issues and political structures
- being able to work effectively with the major stakeholder groups who are affected by a reform proposal
- understanding that **if** [emphasis original] the reforms involve the states and territories – you have to approach them with a degree of respect for their constitutional role; and
- finally, having a very clear idea about what the public service does and what Ministers and their private offices do.

These Australian observations echo the British experience, where former senior practitioners now openly question ministers’ understanding of, and ability to fulfil

their part of the bargain of public leadership. Gus O'Donnell (2014, 6) agrees the partnership between Ministers and officials is essential to good governance and that Ministers must be part of the solution:

... Ministers [should] decide what it is they want to control and then set up bodies with sufficient autonomy to attract and build great leaders. That is the main challenge for future Ministers...

UK Ministers spend a lot of time, too much in my view, talking about public service reform. The public doesn't care about this. They just want better government and better services. That requires us to make our system more democratic, reform the House of Lords, attract people into politics who have the right skills and improve the quality and accountability of Special Advisers... This can be achieved if Ministers and public servants work together on changes for both of them to deliver better outcomes for our countries.

Analysts and practitioners alike have called on ministers to recognise the inherent value of the partnership and to work constructively with their most senior officials (see O'Donnell 2014; 'tHart 2014). This may require ministers (and their staff) to adopt a more 'humble' approach to reform - one more grounded in the realities – both the possibilities and the constraints, of contemporary governance. Etzioni (2014, 618) suggests:

In all such situations, decision-makers ought to start by taking stock of the conditions under which they labour, the resources they command, and the unfolding trends that they may ride – all the while keeping one eye on the place at which they would like to end up. The assumption that one has a free hand and can do more leads to arrogant decision-making, while data show that

human beings are best served when they take into account their inherent limitations and proceed humbly.

Conclusion: beyond the impasse

I expect little to change as a result of the Cameron government's most recent efforts to 'reform' the British Civil Service. Francis Maude and David Cameron won't achieve what they set out to. The outcome will be the usual mix of intended and unintended consequences (Margetts, Perri 6 and Hood 2010). Their resort to outside appointments and faith-based belief that private sector management techniques will catalyse innovation reprises the reform approaches of the Thatcher, Blair and Brown governments in Britain; and indeed internationally, especially across the Westminster family (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). David Cameron's appointment of a Chief Executive of the Civil Service adds yet another layer to the already accreted and overlapping sediment of past reforms (Hood and Lodge 2007).

I don't intend this to be a cynical observation; nor do I suggest reform and change might not be necessary or desirable. Instead, I argue that ministerial criticism of the leadership skills and capacities of their most senior public servants, reflects the wrong problem definition. Their dissatisfaction and frustration actually reflects uncertainties about and tensions in the political-administrative interface, many of which are a consequence of their conduct and behaviour. Ministers' persistent unwillingness to understand and embrace their responsibility for the leadership deficits that they believe impede them from achieving their political and policy goals, and their refusal to be part of the solution to the problem they purport to want to solve, has brought the issue to an apparently insoluble impasse.

The problem arises because what ministers say they want isn't what they really want or need. Political leaders claim to want responsiveness, agility, innovation and a focus on delivery, but they lack the patience or focus needed to support desired change (Rhodes 2011; 2013). They misunderstand and themselves lack the organisational skills and capacities to fulfil their responsibility for strategy and direction setting (see, for example, Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011, 174; Rhodes and Tiernan 2014b). They chop and change, interfere, behave capriciously and lose interest, lacking as they do for the most part, the kinds of skills and experience they criticise civil servants for lacking and because the need to cope and survive is pervasive.

A potentially more fruitful way to move beyond the current impasse would seem to me to be to conceive more broadly of leadership as the shared responsibility of ministers and senior officials and for there to be greater onus on ministers to respect the governing partnership. The centrality of relationships is acknowledged, but currently under-developed in the literature and the broader discourse about policy capacity. We are asking the wrong question when we focus only on senior officials and public managers. Current models of reform that focus only on officials facilitate and reinforce arrogance on the part of ministers and often too, their staff. The challenge for reformers is to broker a new bargain between elected and unelected officials, where the default is trust and mutual respect and a commitment to work together in their shared leadership task. A dose of humility rather than a Royal Commission or other of the proposals that have been suggested, would seem to me to offer the greatest potential to enhance policy capacity.

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