



# The dilemmas of organisational capacity

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## Abstract

For 40 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.

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## 1. 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, 16) conclude that studying leadership ‘is a somewhat bewildering enterprise because there is no unified theory of leadership.’<sup>1</sup> 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 & 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 40 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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 & O’Toole, 2010, 132; Rhodes, 2014).

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, organisational 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 relevant too in determining the mix of 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 that ‘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 & Helms, 2012; t’Hart, 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 40 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, 2015; Rhodes & Tiernan, 2014), 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 and other Westminster-style polities.

## 2. 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.

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