

WEEK 7: Leadership continues; Bureaucratic Leadership

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Bureaucracies

CHAPTER

'Bureaucracy is a giant mechanism operated by pygmies'
HONORE DE BALZAC

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Key issues

- What is bureaucracy?
- What are the major theories of bureaucracy?
- What are the functions of bureaucracies?
- How are bureaucracies organised? How should they be organised?
- Why are bureaucracies so powerful, and why has bureaucratic power expanded?
- How, and how successfully, are bureaucracies controlled?

Handwritten notes:

Bureaucracies
Civil servants Public officials
↓ ↓
changed ↓
↓ ↓
execution of govt

Max Weber
↓
Distinctive organization
↓
all spheres of modern society
Govt

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Theories of bureaucracy

The question of bureaucracy engenders deep political passions. In the modern period, these have invariably been negative. Liberals criticise bureaucracy for its lack of openness and accountability. Socialists, particularly Marxists, condemn it as an instrument of class subordination, and the New Right, for its part, portrays bureaucracy as self-serving and inherently inefficient. Underlying these contrasting views is deep disagreement about the very nature of bureaucracy. Quite simply, the term 'bureaucracy' has been used in so many different ways that the attempt to develop a general definition may have to be abandoned altogether. Albow (1970:84-105) identified no fewer than seven modern concepts of bureaucracy:

- bureaucracy as rational organisation
- bureaucracy as organisational inefficiency
- bureaucracy as rule by officials
- bureaucracy as public administration
- bureaucracy as administration by officials
- bureaucracy as organisation
- bureaucracy as modern society

To some extent, these contrasting concepts and usages reflect the fact that bureaucracies have been viewed differently by different academic disciplines. Students of government, for example, traditionally understood bureaucracy in a literal sense to mean 'rule by the bureau', that is, rule by appointed officials. In *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861/1951), J. S. Mill (see p. 44) therefore contrasted bureaucracy with representative forms of government. In other words, rule by bureaucrats was understood as a particular type of organisation, as a system of administration rather than a system of government. Bureaucracy in this sense can be found not only in democratic and authoritarian states, but also in business corporations, trade unions, political parties and so on. Economists, on the other hand, sometimes use the term to refer to the tax system they are neither disciplined by the profit motive nor responsive to market pressures. In order to make sense of these various usages, three contrasting theories of bureaucracy will be examined:

- bureaucracy as a rational-administrative machine
- bureaucracy as a conservative power bloc
- bureaucracy as a source of government overcapacity

Rational-administrative model

The academic study of bureaucracy has been dominated by the work of Max Weber (see p. 194). For Weber, bureaucracy was an 'ideal type' (see p. 18) of rule based on a set of principles that supposedly characterise bureaucratic organisation. He identified a number of these as follows:

- Institutional areas are fixed and official, and ordered by laws or rules

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Theories of bureaucracy

There is a firmly ordered hierarchy, which ensures that lower offices are supervised by specified higher ones within a chain of command.

Bureaucratic rules are strict enough to minimise the scope for personal discretion.

Appointment and advancement within a bureaucracy is based on professional criteria, such as training, expertise and administrative competence.

The central feature of bureaucracy from the Weberian perspective is its rationality, because bureaucratic organisation is founded on a reliable, predictable and, above all, efficient means of social organisation. For Weber, bureaucracy was nothing less than the characteristic form of organisation found in modern society, and, in his view, its expansion was irreversible. Not only was this a result of the technical superiority of bureaucracy over other forms of administration, but it was also a consequence of significant economic, political and cultural developments. The development of bureaucracy was closely linked to the emergence of capitalist economies, in particular, to the greater pressure for economic efficiency and the emergence of large-scale business units. The development of the modern state, and the extension of its responsibilities into the social and economic spheres, also led to the growth of powerful government bureaucracies.

In Weber's view, the growth of bureaucratism was further stimulated by the process of democratisation, which weakened ideas such as tradition (see p. 195), privilege and duty, and replaced them with a belief in open competition and meritocracy. He believed that the process of 'rationalisation' would ensure that all institutions, whether nominally capitalist or communist, would increasingly resemble each other as they adopted bureaucratic forms of administration. This version of what is called the convergence thesis was subsequently developed by James Burnham (1950:87) in *The Managerial Revolution* (1991). This seminal text argued that modernisation suggested that, regardless of their ideological differences, all modern societies are governed by a class of managers, technicians and state officials whose power is vested in their technical and administrative skills.

Whoever power is vested in their technical and administrative skills, the first Weber was nevertheless aware that bureaucracy was a mixed blessing. In the place, organisational efficiency would be purchased at the expense of democratic participation. Bureaucratism would strengthen hierarchical tendencies, albeit exercised from above by one based on merit, meaning that command would be exercised from above by those officials rather than from below by the masses. This would destroy the socialist dream of a dictatorship of the proletariat, which, Weber (accurately, as it turned out) predicted, would develop into a dictatorship of the officials. In this respect, Weber drew conclusions similar to those of his friend Robert Michels (1878-1936), who developed the iron law of oligarchy (see p. 238) on the basis of his study of political parties.

However, Weber was less pessimistic than Michels about the prospects for liberal democracy. Although he recognised the tendency of bureaucrats to seek the perpetuation of bureaucracy and to exceed its administrative functions, he believed that this could at least be resisted through the use of liberal devices such as electoral control and institutional fragmentation. The other potential danger that Weber highlighted was that the domination of the bureaucratic ideal could bring about a

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bureaucracy is always there. The Northcote-Trevelyan reforms of 1870 that created the modern UK civil service were based on the principle of impartial selection...

However, certain characteristics have disadvantages. In the absence of effective poverty and disadvantage. In other cases, permanence may breed in civil servants either a tendency towards arrogance and insularity, or a bias in favour of conservatism.

Organisation of bureaucracies

One of the limitations of Weber's theory of bureaucracy is that it suggests that the drive for efficiency and rationality will lead to the adoption of essentially similar bureaucratic structures world over. Weber's 'ideal type' thus ignores the various ways in which bureaucracies can be organised...

All state bureaucracies are in some way organised on the basis of purpose or function. This is achieved through the construction of departments, ministries and agencies charged with responsibility for particular policy areas...

The most significant feature of these functionally defined bureaucracies is the degree of centralisation or decentralisation within them. The systems found in the remaining communist regimes, such as China, which are subject to strict party control...

Corruption

Corruption, in a general sense, is a failure of integrity or honesty. Power is thus used to deprive others of their property, to deprive them of their freedom and to enrich oneself.

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functioning as a hybridised mechanism for interest articulation and aggregation, resembling to a form of 'institutional pluralism' (Hoghe, 1977). The UK civil service has traditionally been characterised in some ways, the Fulton Report of 1968...

The most centralised liberal-democratic bureaucracy has traditionally been that of France. Whereas bureaucracies in states like the UK and Germany have developed through a process of reform and adaptation, the French system was constructed on the basis of the Napoleonic model of administration. This emphasised the importance of a highly centralised and hierarchically structured body of technical experts...

The USA, in contrast, is an example of a decentralised bureaucracy. The federal bureaucracy operates under the formal authority of the president as chief administrator. However, it is so diffuse and unwieldy that all presidents struggle to coordinate and direct its activities. One reason for this fragmentation is that the responsibilities of the federal government overlap with those of state and local governments...

with policy making... These ideas have been taken further by... which stands for... The Clinton administration... has been criticised... most of it...

with policy making and leaves the delivery of services or policy implementation to other bodies acting as agents or policy implementers to necessary be linked to the contraction of state responsibility...

These ideas have been influential in the USA and a number of other western countries, but the construction of an 'enabling state, even a 'deletable state', has been taken further in the UK through the civil service reforms introduced by Thatcher...

The Citizen's Charter initiative, launched in the UK in 1991, attempted to compensate for inefficiency and unresponsiveness in public administration through the use of performance targets and quality measurement. Such innovations have also been accompanied by a substantial increase in the role of quangos (see p. 350) in the administration of services such as health, education, urban development and regulation...

As governments struggle to keep public spending under control, such developments, especially the divorce between policy advice and policy implementation, are likely to become more common. However, the drive to streamline administration, to promote efficiency and cut costs carries political costs. The most obvious of these is the weakening of public accountability and the emergence of a 'democratic deficit'...

A second problem is that the introduction of management techniques, structures and, increasingly, personnel from the private sector may weaken the public-service ethos which state bureaucracies have striven over the years to develop. The civil-service culture in states as different as Japan, India, France and the UK may be criticised for its aloofness, even arrogance, but it is at least linked to ideas like public service and the national interest...

Quangos: advantages and disadvantages

Quango is an acronym for quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation. This is a relatively loose and confusing term in its most general sense, ranging from a reference to any body carrying out government functions that is not a government department to a reference to any body carrying out government functions that is not a government department...

- The benefits of quangos include the following:
- They allow government to call on the experience, expertise and specialist knowledge of outside advisers.
- They reduce the burden of work of 'official' government departments and agencies.

- Quangos have been criticised for the following reasons:
- They expand the range of ministerial patronage and so contribute to the centralisation of political power.
- They weaken democratic accountability by reducing the ability of representative institutions to oversee the workings of government.
- They foster balkanisation by making public administration more disjointed and less systematic.

type of reorganisation tends to be associated with the rolling back of the state, it may in practice lead to greater centralisation and government control. This occurs because a government relinquishes direct responsibility for the delivery of services, it is forced to set up a range of bodies to carry out funding and regulatory functions. This, in turn, allows politicians to exert influence through patronage and the setting of performance targets, powers that formerly came within the jurisdiction of professional bureaucrats (Feather, 1995).

Bureaucratic power: out of control?

Despite their constitutional image as loyal and supportive public servants, bureaucracies have widely been seen as powerful and influential figures who collectively control and trawl have drawn attention to the phenomenon of bureaucratic power and the extent to which politicians are subordinate to it. Japanese civil servants, especially those in the prestigious Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry, are generally viewed as the 'permanent politicians' who masterminded the Japanese 'economic miracle' of the 1950s and 1960s. Kellner and Crowther (Hart 1980) dubbed the UK's civil service 'Briars' ruling class'. This view was reinforced in the

members of the... driving force in... administrative... Concerns about the political life of civil service that cause state radical policy interests of public or free-market bureaucratic... it both because ministers who other precept... fed Newth... - the logic... - the status... The policy scope for civil service... and it is not options ca... clear de... manifest... uncontrol... of discou... Link... streng... alliances has led ships be... be relat... to sh... been m... are con... whole... Contr... routes... The distrib... are p... there... pract...

be damaged by the exposure of scandals, corruption and administrative ineptitude. The publicity given to the Watergate affair in the USA in the 1970s thus led to tighter oversight of US government agencies such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Similarly, the French newspaper *Le Monde* played a significant role in contributing to the resignation of the defence minister, On the other hand, such investigations can be severely hampered by the culture of secrecy that usually prevails in state administration, and by the absence of open government (see p. 292).

Politicisation

One of the most common ways of exercising political control is to recruit the senior bureaucracy into the ideological enthusiasms of the government of the day. This effectively blurs the distinctions between politics and administration, and between politicians and public officials. Control is overtly accomplished through a system of political appointments. A spoils system, as it became known, was institutionalised in the USA by Andrew Jackson in the nineteenth century, when he replaced about 20 per cent of the federal civil service with his own men. When there is a new US president, the administration changes. Some 3000 top posts are filled by political appointees, mostly in a rush between the election in November and the inauguration of the new president in January. Fewer than 200 of these appointments are likely to be made by the president personally; the others are made by senior executive officers subject to presidential approval.

In Germany, although the formal scope for making ministerial appointments is limited, the *Berufverbot* (literally, the 'denial of access to a profession') system allows incoming ministers and governments to discard unwanted officials by retiring them on full pay and appoint more sympathetic ones in their place. However, covert politicisation is more widespread. In the UK, the abolition of the Civil Service Department in 1981 led to allegations that the senior personnel of the civil service were being 'Thatcherised'. Criticism stemmed from the close interest that Margaret Thatcher was able to take in the new senior appointments system, and her well publicised criteria for preferment - are they 'one of us'? Creeping politicisation has also become a feature of French administration. Approximately 500 senior posts are now filled at the discretion of leading government figures, and, since the 1980s, those appointed have usually had a highly partisan profile or been linked personally or politically with senior politicians. The French higher civil service therefore now resembles a patchwork of politicised clans, rather than a unified body standing above party politics.

The attraction of a politicised senior bureaucracy is plainly that it ensures that there is a higher level of loyalty and commitment in such a group than would be likely amongst politically impartial civil servants. Moreover, those observers who believe that neutrality is always a myth, arguing that some kind of political bias is inevitable in the state bureaucracy, generally hold that a system of overt politicisation is preferable to one of covert politicisation. However, political commitment also brings serious disadvantages. In the first place, politicisation strikes at the very heart of the idea of a professional and permanent civil service. Once bureaucrats are selected on political grounds by the government of the day, or encouraged to share their ideological sympathies, their appointments become as temporary as those of their political masters. This, in turn, means that knowledge and experience

Ombudsman

Ombudsman is a Scandinavian word that has no exact English equivalent. An ombudsman is an officer of the state who is appointed to safeguard citizens' rights in a particular sector and investigate allegations of maladministration, ranging from the improper use of powers to the failure to follow procedures and simple incompetence. The role of an ombudsman is to supplement, not replace, normal avenues of complaints such as administrative courts or elected representatives. However, as ombudsmen are concerned with wider administration morality, their investigations and findings seldom have the force of law. While the ombudsman system may strengthen the exercise of oversight and redress, it has been criticised as tokenistic (ombudsmen lack executive power), and because it relies too heavily on the qualities of the incumbent (who is usually an 'insider').

are not accumulated over a number of governments, and, as in the USA, that a change in administration brings about a major breach in the continuity of government.

Furthermore, it is difficult to have both political commitment and meritocracy within the civil service. In a politicised service, not only are appointments made on the basis of political affiliation and personal loyalty, rather than ability and training, but it may be more difficult to attract high-calibre staff to work in temporary posts than it is in a meritocratic one. A more insidious danger is that ideological enthusiasm may blind civil servants to the drawbacks and disadvantages of policy proposals. From this point of view, the virtue of neutrality is that it establishes an unbiased relationship between bureaucrats and politicians, allowing the former to see the weaknesses, as well as the strengths, of the policy options they are required to examine. For instance, perhaps the case with which the disastrous 'poll tax' was devised in the UK in the late 1980s bears witness to the degree to which civil servants under Margaret Thatcher had ceased to interject, 'But minister...'

Counter-bureaucracies

The final mechanism of political control is through structures designed to support or assist politicians or to act as a counterweight to the official bureaucracy. The simplest such system is the use of political advisers or 'outsiders', which is now a feature of almost all modern states. More significantly, institutions of various kinds have been established to share ministers' workloads and provide them with personal advisory staff. In the UK, this has occurred on an *ad hoc* basis. Edward Heath set up the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS) in 1970, Harold Wilson created the Policy Unit in 1974, and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s expanded the role of the Private Office and also sought advice from right-wing 'think tanks' such as the Centre for Policy Studies and the Adam Smith Institute. Of more general application is the device of the *conseil ministériel*. These have long been established in France and been taken up in states like Italy and Austria, as well as by the EU. Cabinets are ministers' personal teams of advisers (in France, usually 15-20 strong) that help to formulate policy, assist in supervising departmental activities, and help ministers to carry out their various other responsibilities.

The idea of a counter-bureaucracy has been most elaborately developed in the USA, in the form of the Executive Office of the President (EOP). This was established by President Roosevelt following the Brownlow Committee's declaration that the President 'needs help'. The EOP is the president's personal bureaucracy. It consists of a growing number of councils and offices and employs about 1400 staff. Its key agencies are the White House Office, which comprises the president's closest political advisers, the Office of Management and Budget, which assists in the preparation of budgetary and legislative proposals, the National Security Council (NSC), which provides the president with professional advice on economic policy, and the Council of Economic Advisors, which provides the president with professional advice on economic policy.

The purpose of counter-bureaucracies is to compensate for the imbalance in the relationship between amateur, temporary and outnumbered politicians and their expert, permanent and professional officials. However, this form of political control has its drawbacks. In the case of the EOP, it leads to the duplication of government agencies and so causes jurisdictional conflicts and a measure of bureaucratic infighting. This has been particularly evident in the often fraught relationship between the National Security Council and the State Department.

SUMMARY

A further difficulty is that counter-bureaucracies may compound, rather than solve, the problem of political control. Margaret Thatcher, for instance, abolished the CPRS in 1983, believing it to be the source of damaging leaks during that year's election campaign. Similarly, NSC staff, including Lieutenant-Colonel Oliver North, were at the centre of the Iran-Contra affair that rocked the Reagan administration in the 1980s. Lastly, allowing politicians to surround themselves with hand-picked advisers creates the danger that they will cut themselves off from political reality and be told only what they want to hear. This problem was highlighted by Nixon and Reagan, who became overdependent on EOP advisers, partly because they believed that they could neither trust nor control an essentially hostile federal bureaucracy.

Summary

- ◆ The term bureaucracy has been used in a number of ways. Originally, it meant rule by officials as opposed to elected politicians. In the social sciences, it is usually understood as a mode of organisation. Modern political analysts, however, use the term bureaucracy to mean the administrative machinery of the state, bureaucrats being non-elected state officials or civil servants, who may or may not be subject to political control.
- ◆ Three major theories of bureaucracy have been advanced. The Weberian model suggests that bureaucracy is a rational-administrative machine, the characteristic form of organisation in modern society. The conservative power-bloc model emphasises the degree to which the bureaucracy reflects broader class interests and can resist political control. The bureaucratic oversupply model emphasises a tendency towards 'big government' caused by the pursuit of career self-interest on the part of civil servants.
- ◆ The core function of the bureaucracy is to implement or execute law and policy through the administration of government business. However, civil servants also play a significant role in offering policy advice to ministers, in articulating and aggregating interests (especially through links to client groups), and in maintaining political stability and continuity when there is a change of government or administration.
- ◆ Bureaucracies have traditionally been organised on the basis of purpose or function, hence their division into departments, ministries and agencies. The degree of centralisation or decentralisation within them varies considerably. Modern trends, however, are towards the divorce of policy making from policy implementation, and the incorporation of private-sector management techniques, if not outright privatisation.
- ◆ There is concern about bureaucratic power because of the threat it poses to democratic accountability. The principal sources of bureaucratic power include the ability of civil servants to control the flow of information and thus determine what their political masters know, the logistical advantages that they enjoy as permanent and full-time public officials, and their status as experts and custodians of the national interest.