

## Recovering the ‘craft’ of public administration in network governance \*

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## Prologue

My job as a professor was a strange one to my father. He believed I should get a ‘proper job’ until he found out how much I earned. Then he became less vocal, although I suspect he still had no idea what I did or why anyone would pay me to do it. Others have been less kind. Probably the best insult so far came from the practitioner who considered me ‘a lighthouse in the desert - bright but useless’. I laughed and, as is so often the case, I thought of a riposte ten seconds too late. I should have said ‘even in deserts, lighthouses bring light to dark places’. And that is my task today; to shine a light into the dark corners of public service reform.

## Introduction

For my entire academic career, I have been watching the reform of government. It has been an ever-present relentless tide of change masquerading as improvement. Few will remember all the initiatives. Fewer lasted. Why this obsessive concern with reforming the public sector? What changed? There were important changes in the context of governance. There was the economic downturn after the oil crisis of 1973. There was the rise of neo-liberal ideas. The unintended consequence of attempts to rein in the over-mighty state in favour of markets was the fragmentation of the public sector that created more complex policy making. We witnessed the rise of network governance. Public sector reform has rarely dropped off the political agenda of Western states. In this lecture I ask, ‘What is the role of public servants in the new public governance?’<sup>1</sup> I argue that the old craft skills of traditional public administration remain of paramount importance. However, it is not a question of traditional skills versus the

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<sup>1</sup> See also: Bovaird and Löffler 2009: 22; Bell and Hindmoor 2009; Pierre and Peters 2000; Torfing et al 2013.

new skills of new public management or network governance. It is a question of what works; of what skills fit in a particular context. The pendulum has swung too far for too long towards the new and the fashionable. I want the pendulum to swing back towards bureaucracy and the traditional skills of bureaucrats as part of the repertoire of governing.

### **From traditional public administration to the new public governance**

One of the problems with my subject is that we are always looking for the next big sexy new reform. Reform succeeds reform with no time for the intended changes to take place, no evaluation, so no clear evidence of either success or failure. Rather, we are left with the dilemmas created by the overlapping residues of past reforms. So, we need to take stock of where we have come from. We need to look back to look forward.

To that end, Figure 1 summarises the shift from traditional public administration to the new public management to the latest wave of reform, the new public governance.

Table 1: PA, NPM and NPG Compared

Paradigm/key elements	Theoretical roots	State tradition	Unit of analysis	Key focus	Resource allocation mechanism	Core beliefs
<b>Public Administration (PA)</b>	Political science and public policy	Unitary/ Federal	The political-administrative system	Policy advice and implementation	Hierarchy	Public sector ethos
<b>New Public Management (NPM)</b>	Rational choice theory and management studies	Regulatory	The organization	Management of organizational resources and performance	Markets	Efficiency, competition and the market
<b>New Public Governance (NPG)</b>	New Institutionalism and network theory	Differentiated	The network	Negotiation of values, meanings and relationships	Networks	Trust and reciprocity

Source: Compiled from Osborne 2010; and Rhodes 1998

### Traditional public administration

We have turned our backs on traditional public administration; it is seen as the problem not the solution. I believe politicians, staffers and even some public servants hold many important misconceptions about the past of our public services. Traditional public administration refers to classic bureaucrats working in a hierarchy of authority and conserving the state tradition. In Table 1, their task is to provide policy advice for their political masters and oversee the implementation of the politician's decision.

These characteristics of civil servants are summed up in the description 'generalists'. Simon James (1992: 26), a former civil servant, sums it up succinctly:

What matters is ... the capacity to absorb detail at speed, to analyse the unfamiliar problem at short notice, to clarify and summarise it, to present

options and consequences lucidly, and to tender sound advice in precise and clear papers (see also Bridges 1950)

The term generalist is commonly employed in Westminster countries but the skills and tasks to which it refers are not specific to them. Thus, Heclo (1977: 3) talks about the ‘craft knowledge’ of the high ranking Washington bureaucrats:

No systematic body of knowledge or special training exists to instruct political and bureaucratic executives on how to handle their mutual relationships. They may have technical or professional qualifications, but their interactions are not derived from professional expertise. Instead, operations are based on craft knowledge – understanding acquired by learning on the job (Heclo 1977: 2).

Goodsell (1992: 247) also sees public administration as ‘the execution of an applied or practical art’ (see also Waldo 1968: 10). Traditional public administration continues to be characterised as an art and a craft as much as it is a science, and public servants are generalists; that is, a profession based on craft knowledge.

### The new public management (NPM)

The last 40 years have seen three waves of NPM reforms. In Table 1, the first wave of NPM was managerialism or hands-on, professional management; explicit standards and measures of performance; managing by results; and value for money. That was only the beginning. In the second wave, governments embraced marketization or neo-liberal beliefs about competition and markets. It introduced ideas about restructuring the incentive structures of public service provision through contracting-out, and quasi-markets. The third wave of NPM focuses on service delivery (see Pollitt 2003: chapter 2). Nothing has gone away. We have

geological strata of reforms that comprise a ‘civil service syndrome’ in which ‘initiatives come and go, overlap and ignore each other, leaving behind residues of varying size and style’ (Hood and Lodge 2007: 59). The inoculation theory of reform does not work - you are not immune after one bout. Although the extent of the reforms varies from country to country, and the Anglophone countries were the most enthusiastic, public service reform is ubiquitous. It is comprehensively mapped in Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011: 9) who conclude ‘it has become a key element in many ... countries. It has internationalised. ... In short, it has arrived.’

What are the implications for the public servants of NPM reform? The search for better management remains at the forefront of civil service reform, and better management means the practices of the private sector. There is an embarrassment of examples. Two must suffice. The UK Coalition government’s *Civil Service Reform Plan 2012* with its attendant *Civil Services Capabilities Plan* (2013) and the *Civil Service Competencies Framework* (2013) focus on skills and competencies. The focus is management: for example, ‘the Civil Service needs staff with commissioning and contracting skills; and project management capabilities need a serious upgrade (2012: 9). Australia had The Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration (2010) and *Leadership and Core Skills Strategy and Integrated Leadership System*.<sup>2</sup> In both countries, leadership is often invoked and it refers to managing government departments.

The nearer reform gets to the political sphere, the vaguer the discussion. Thus, better policy making boils down to a call for greater contestability in policy advice and, under the label ‘what works’, it seeks more evidence-based policy making (2012: chapter 2). It does not discuss the respective roles of permanent secretaries and ministers. When the Report touches on the

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<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.apsc.gov.au/learn/aps-leadership-and-core-skills-strategy-2014-15-refresh/leadership-and-core-skills>; and <http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications-and-media/current-publications/integrated-leadership-system>. Last accessed 13 October 2014.

tasks of political-administrators, it can strike a politically naive tone. Thus, on implementation, it suggests, for example, ministers, who will be in office for two years or less, will delay a policy announcement while it is thought through and civil servants are retrained (2012: 18). The comment ‘seems implausible’ springs to one’s lips unbidden. I can hear the impatience in the Minister’s voice. Indeed, it is a moot point whether NPM has had much effect on the behaviour of ministers. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011: 180-81) conclude ‘there is an absence of convincing evidence’, so the case is ‘unproven’.

### The new public governance (NPG)

In Table 1, managing networks is at the heart of NPG. Normally, the term governance is distinguished from government to stress that we are talking about the changed and changing boundaries between state and civil society: hence the phrase from government to governance. The change at the heart of the argument is the growing importance of policy networks in the policy process and its implications for the state. For example, both the Dutch school (Kickert 1997) and the Anglo-governance school (Rhodes 1997a) focus on the growth of networks and the effects on the state. Both posit a shift from hands-on to hands-off steering by the state. So, network governance, and its later acronym NPG, refer to:

the complex process through which a plurality of social and political actors with diverging interests interact in order to formulate, promote, and achieve common objectives by means of mobilizing, exchanging, and deploying a range of ideas, rules, and resources’ (Torfing et al. 2012: 14; see also Koliba et al. 2011: 60).

What does network governance say about the role of the public service. What are the new tasks and skills? What is the place of the ‘traditional’ public servant? The first point to

note is that whereas NPM inspired a vast array of management reforms, NPG inspired no equivalent programme. Of course, there was some reaction to multiplying networks. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011: 212) see joining-up in its various forms as one of the themes of reform that has 'grown in prominence internationally since the turn of the century' (see for example: *Modernising Government* Cm 4310 1999; Management Advisory Committee (MAC) 2004).

Among academics, there was burgeoning interest in, and advice about, how to manage networks (see Agranoff 2007), although few were concerned with the role of the public service. An interesting exception is Torfing et al (2012: 156-9; and chapter 7) who suggest that the traditional role of the public service is 'supplemented (not replaced) with that of meta-governor managing and facilitating interactive governance'. Their task is to 'balance autonomy of networks with hands-on intervention'. They have various specific ways of carrying out this balancing act. They can 'campaign for a policy, deploy policy narratives, act as boundary spanners, and form alliance with politicians'. They become 'meta-governors' managing the mix of bureaucracy, markets and networks (see also: Koliba et al 2011: xxxii and chapter 8).

In a phrase, the neutral, competent servants of the political executive must now master the skills for managing the complex, non-routine issues, policies and relationships in networks; that is, meta-governing, boundary spanning, and collaborative leadership. The task is to manage the mix of bureaucracy, markets and networks (Rhodes 1997b). I do not dispute that the public service needs new skills. But it is a step too far to talk of these new skills requiring 'a full blown cultural transformation' (Goldsmith and Eggers 2004: 178). Indeed, part of the problem is this call for transformative cultural change.

When reform was underway in Australia in the 1980s, Sir Arthur Tange (1982: 2) commented:

having demolished or at least fractured the symmetry of the Westminster model, the demolishers seem less capable of replacing it with a coherent structure of ideas to be a guiding light for loyalties and behavioural proprieties in the Federal Public Service. The public service is susceptible to damage from being set adrift in this way. ... In short, the focus of investigations and recommendations concerning 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.

Such sentiments remain relevant. There is still much to value in the traditional craft of public administration.

## Recovering the craft

Why has public service reform such a chequered history? In part, it is a failure of political will. Politicians make bold statements but often are unsure about what changes they want. When they do propose change, they move on to other policy concerns all too quickly. They talk the talk but do not walk the walk. Also, as Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011: 169-70) point out, politicians are reluctant to stick with the roles allocated to them by the reforms. It is all well and good decentralising authority to bureaucrats but, when something goes wrong, ministers cannot resist the temptation to interfere. Public service reform is also a symbolic policy. Everybody loves bashing the bureaucracy. It has the appearance of decisive action. But effective organizational change is a long slog and the next election is always looming. When I imagine myself in a minister's or permanent secretary's shoes, performance management does not matter much. Useful, but not where the real action is. As Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011: 174)

conclude, any reform that ‘assigns a new role to politicians is at risk of being embarrassed by their lack of cooperation’.

There is also a more fundamental explanation for the slow pace of reform. It is not because civil servants are ill-trained, stupid or venal, or because of a lack of political will and ministerial inability to resist intervening. It is because such private sector management techniques do not fit the political context and can be neutered by both bureaucratic and party political games. Such games are compounded by the demands of political accountability and the media spotlight, which pick up relatively trivial problems of implementation and threaten the minister’s career. There is a failure to recognise the continued relevance of the old, craft skills.

This failure is all too obvious from a recent storm in a teacup in Britain. An internal civil service document setting out the job description for a permanent secretary was publicly criticised by Francis Maude, Minister for the Cabinet Office responsible for the civil service. The document stated that permanent secretaries need:

The ability to manage the complexity of the Ministerial/Departmental interface, effectively acting as a pivot point in balancing the needs and demands of Ministers and high-level stakeholders within Whitehall and externally with stewardship of their Department and its customers.

Maude claimed this statement was ‘without constitutional propriety’ and the civil service should focus on ‘the priorities of the government of the day’.

According to the BBC, the document ‘enraged cabinet ministers’ because it contains the statement that permanent secretary ‘tolerates high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty and rapid change – and at times irrational political demands’. Lord Butler of Brockwell, former

Head of the Home Civil Service, considered the document accurate and observed that ‘There is nothing there that I wouldn't have put down in black and white’.<sup>3</sup> What is clear is that there is no agreement on either the stewardship role of the civil service or on the appropriate relationship between ministers and civil servants. Revisiting the old arts would seem timely.<sup>4</sup>

## Craft

In this section, I argue the old craft skills remain essential. We need to ‘recover’ the bureaucracy we needlessly cast aside for the fashion of the day. But phrases such as the generalist public servant, task knowledge and profession skate over the surface of their skills. What is their craft knowledge? If the focus is on the craft then we need to explore what public administrators do in their specific context – on how things work around here. So, we need to systematise their experience and practice.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* a craft is a skill, an occupation or profession requiring special skill or knowledge. To call something a craft rather than a science is to accept the importance experiential knowledge as well as formal knowledge. The craft is learned on the job. A craft involves passing on practical knowledge from generation to generation. There is a ‘master’ and the novitiate moves from apprentice to journeyman to master. Commonly, there is a profession – or historically, a guild – and it controls membership and regulates knowledge and practices. Much of that knowledge is tacit. It has not been

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<sup>3</sup> See: ‘Indicators of Potential for Permanent Secretaries’. The document was produced by YSC, business psychology consultants, for the Cabinet Office. Available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/07\\_07\\_14\\_permanentsecretary.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/07_07_14_permanentsecretary.pdf). Last accessed 14 October 2014. The comments by Maude and Butler can be found at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-28202293>; and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-25163208>. Last accessed 14 October 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Although I give a British example, the debate is common to most Westminster systems. See, for example, on Australia Watt 2012; and on Canada, Heintzman 2014.

systematised. It is complex. Often it is secret. In this way, the practitioners of the craft can control the supply and demand for their skills.

In seeking to identify the ‘traditional’ skills, there is no defining text, no definitive survey, of these skills, which depend on both individual talents and the context in which they are exercised. Indeed, existing lists of skills are about what skills the public servant ought to have in the era of NPM, not descriptions of the skills public servants deploy in their everyday lives. I illustrate the argument whenever possible with the words of the practitioners; of the political-administrators.<sup>5</sup>

There is a prior question – which civil servants are we talking about? There are at least three possible occupational groups; the political-administrators at the head of departments of state for whom work is a vocation, the service delivery managers for whom work is a career, and the front office staff for whom a paid job is all too often a means to other ends (Green et al. 1993: 522). One does not have to read many reports before realising that most reforms are aimed at the managers and their front office staff. Here, however, I focus on the political-administrators and on the skills of: counselling, stewardship, prudence, probity, judgement, diplomacy, and political nous.

### Counselling

The traditional public servant has been described as the ‘Mandarin’ and their skill lies not ‘in administering policy but in making it, not least because of a seemingly unchallengeable “professional” experience and judgment as instituted, independent “counsel of government”’ (du Gay 2009: 360). Their allegiance is to the state rather than exclusively to the governing

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<sup>5</sup> See for example: Barberis 1996; Berkley and Rouse 2009; Bridges 1950; Butler 1992; Goetz 1997; Hecl 1977; Goodsell 1990, 1992 and 2004; Green et al 1993; Olsen, 2006; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011; Shergold 2004; Waldo 1968; Wanna et al 2012; Wass 1984; and Watt 2012.

party and they provide a check on the partisan actions of ministers. Their characteristics include:

‘party political neutrality ...; willingness to offer frank and fearless advice without regard to personal consequences; the obligation to set aside ‘private’ interests and commitments in the performance of public duties, and to abstain from the use of official position or information for private gain; rigorous and demonstrable dispassionateness, integrity and propriety in the conduct of official business; and, acceptance of the obligations of confidentiality, security and anonymity (du Gay 2009: 365).

In providing counsel to ministers, these mandarins are not just providing specific policy advice, although, of course, they do provide such advice. They also provide what Bridges (1950: 50-51) calls ‘a kind of rarefied common sense’ based on ‘the ‘slow accretion and accumulation of experience’. They spot the snags in the minister’s proposals. Such ‘snag spotting’ may irritate ministers. It may be seen as a delaying tactic. Yet, it is a core skill of the political-administrator. Finally, they can act as a counterweight to partisan interests and arguments. Here lies the dilemma. In suggesting to a minister there are problems with the policy, counsellors court the danger of appearing to usurp power. They could be seen as putting their conception of the state before that of the minister; they take it upon themselves to determine the public interest.

For some commentators that is the role of the public servant. James Fesler (1990: 91) argues that the public interest is for administrators what objectivity is for scholars ... If there is not a public interest then we must denounce the idea of ideals - if it is illusory, so are justice, liberty and integrity’. So, the political-administrator is guardian of the public interest; they act as Platonic guardians.

The claim poses some intractable questions. Why are they the arbiters of what is in the public interest? What is the basis of their claim to act authoritatively? Is it legitimate? Are they accountable? The call for political responsiveness by politicians in Australia sprang from a determination to end the reign of an Imperial public service that took too much on itself. In the UK, it brought the categorical assertion that the interests of the government of the day were the public interest (Armstrong 1985). In both these countries, and elsewhere, the public interest is seen as the preserve of democratically elected and accountable politicians, not unelected administrators.

There have been various attempts to resolve this dilemma (see for example Wamley et al 1990) but such efforts miss the point. The point is the dilemma; that is speaking truth to power with all its attendant tensions. The public servant's task is not to define the public interest. The task is to challenge. The skill is forensic interrogation. Ministers will bridle at such challenges but that does not mean they are illegitimate, only unwelcome. The tension is the point. After all, nine times out of ten the minister will win.

### Stewardship

Bureaucrats are not leaders. The task of senior bureaucrats is to apply top-down authority; they are cogs in the machine. But with NPM came the idea of entrepreneurial leadership; of public servants who sought out ways to improve the performance of their organization and sold these ideas to their various stakeholders (see, for example: Doig and Hargrove 1987; Moore 1995). Terry (1995) is critical of these borrowing from the private sector leadership literature. He sees the heroic or transformative model of leadership with the great man radically changing the organization and disdaining its existing traditions as a threat to 'institutional integrity'. An institution has integrity when 'it is faithful to the functions, values, and distinctive set of unifying principles that define its special competence and character'

(Terry 1995: 44). The task of administrative leaders is to preserve this institutional integrity; that is, to conserve the institution's mission, values, and support. They must balance the autonomy necessary to maintain integrity with responsibility to elected politicians.

Administrative leaders practice 'administrative conservatorship' or stewardship (Watt 2012: 9). The practices of stewardship are 'a form of statesmanship', which 'requires professional expertise, political skill, and a sophisticated understanding of what it means to be an active participant in governance'. Such skills are deployed to 'maintain commitment among the executive cadre to core agency values and sustain support among key external constituents and internal interest groups' (Terry 1995: 172).

For (Terry 1995: 172) advocates of the public entrepreneur are on a 'misguided quest' and he mounts a vigorous attack on the evil twins of public entrepreneurs and neo-managerialism. Together, they encourage self-promotion, rule breaking, power politics, and risk taking. They undermine democratic accountability and are 'oblivious' to such values as fairness, justice, and the public interest. A decade later, the debate will not die. Frederickson and Matkin (2007: 36-8) compare public leadership to 'gardening', requiring time, patience, experience, and political awareness. They are 'quiet leaders' who are in 'for the long haul'. They are about continuity, learning from the past and preserving institutional memory (Pollitt 2008). Indeed, much government is about coping, the appearance of rule and keeping things going (Rhodes 2011); it is about stewardship.

Senior public servants in Australia have heeded this particular call. The Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration (2010: 5) in *Ahead of the Game* identified the stewardship role of departmental secretaries, which they saw as necessary 'to ensure that the APS has the capacity to serve successive governments' and to maintaining 'less

tangible factors’ such as ‘the trust placed in the APS and building a culture of innovation and integrity in policy advice’.<sup>6</sup>

## Prudence

For Kane and Patapan (2006: 711) prudence is ‘the virtue of practical wisdom’. Their definition is broad, combining intellectual capacity with a personal character habituated to all the virtues, such as courage and truthfulness, which have been tempered by experience (Kane and Patapan 2006: 713). Here, I focus on practical wisdom. Under ‘probity’, I consider the virtues.

The notion of ‘practical wisdom’ is unpacked by Goodsell (1992: 247) who considers public administration as ‘the execution of an applied or practical art’. It is concerned with helping practitioners find the right ‘tool’ (Waldo 1968). Public servants must become *masters* of their craft; that is, become experts. They acquire mastery through *practical learning*, which recognises that ‘traditional craft knowledge is not systematically codified and written down. It is known informally, passed on verbally to apprentices and journeymen over time’. Through this mastery and practical learning, public servants build a sense of identity; an *esprit de corps* - a phrase which encapsulates more than the prosaic English equivalents of ‘loyalty’ and ‘morale’. Finally, this identity breeds pride in one’s work and a willingness to accept *responsibility* for it (adapted from Goodsell 1992: 247-8).

## Probity

When Kane and Patapan (2006: 713 and 719) talk of the virtues, they itemise courage, temperance, generosity, magnanimity, mildness, humour, truthfulness, moderation, and

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<sup>6</sup> See also on Australia, the *Public Service Act* 1999, Part 7 s57 (1c); and on the UK the *Constitutional Reform and Governance Act* 2010 and consequent Civil Service Code available @: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-code> Last accessed 14 October 2014.

wisdom. Harold Nicolson (1950: 126) took for granted the virtues of intelligence, knowledge, discernment, prudence, hospitality, charm, industry, courage and tact. The UK Civil Service's code highlights the four values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality.<sup>7</sup> All have in common the idea that public servants should have the quality of possessing strong moral principles; that is probity. The lists vary in length and emphasis but honesty and decency are always to the fore.

## Judgement

The ability to make considered decisions is close to acting prudently but under this heading I want to explore a distinctive notion; 'appreciation'. For Vickers 1995 (chapters 2 and 4) appreciation is central to judgement. He defines it as follows:

Appreciation manifests itself in the exercise through time of mutually related judgements of reality and value. ... Such judgements disclose what can best be described as a set of readinesses to distinguish some aspects of the situation rather than others and to clarify and value these in this way rather than in that. I will describe these readinesses as an appreciative system

The appreciative system is a 'net of which weft and warp are reality concepts and value concepts'. It is how we make sense of the world. It enables us to make sense of the observed world and of how we communicate in that world. Appreciation is about the process of meaning making in the world.

Departments are a store house of knowledge and experience of what worked and what aroused public criticism. This departmental philosophy can be understood as an appreciative

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<sup>7</sup> Available@: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-code>. Last accessed 14 October 2014. On the values of the APS see: <http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications-and-media/current-publications/aps-values-and-code-of-conduct-in-practice>. Last accessed 14 October 2014.

system; it is the net of beliefs about reality and values through which public servants understand their world. It provides the organised, selective retelling of the past. Senior public servants recover past practice and events to explain why things are as they are, and to justify recommendations for the future. I am talking about the inherited traditions of the organization, and storytelling as a key way of handing down that tradition to new arrivals. It is a form of folk psychology. It provides the everyday theory and shared languages for storytelling. It is the collective memory of the department; a retelling of yesterday to make sense of today (see Rhodes 2011: chapter 9).

Such stories can be dismissed as spin, only one step removed from evasion and lies. However, there are criteria for comparing stories. A story must spell out the reasons justifying the story line. A story will be more or less plausible depending on whether the reasons are inferred from the relevant information (Bourdon 1993). Finally, the robust quality of the reasons and supporting evidence will be tested by forensic interrogation; by comparison with other stories.

A craft involves judgement based on experience because science cannot provide the answers and the art of judgement lies in weighing the merits of competing stories and spotting the snags. Indeed, these skills can be seen as their distinctive contribution to the analysis of policy.

## Diplomacy

Nicholson (1950: 15 and 116-20) defines diplomacy as 'the management of international affairs by negotiation'. He also identifies seven diplomatic virtues: truthfulness; precision; calm; good temper; patience; modesty; and loyalty (to the government one serves). There is a charming quality to Nicholson's account. The budding diplomat is advised that: 'above everything, do not allow

yourself to become excited about your work'; 'patience and perseverance are also essential to any successful negotiator'; and 'personal vanity breeds self-satisfaction which leads to a loss of adaptability and a decline in imagination'.

For all its slightly old-fashioned, even quaint, air Nicholson signals an important shift in style. François de Callières (1716: 103) commented:

Now, if I were in the place of this Prince, wielding his power, subject to his passions and prejudices, what effect would my mission and my arguments have on me?' The more often he puts himself in the position of others, the more subtle and effective will his arguments be.

Diplomacy may be an old-fashioned word but the arts of negotiation and persuasion remain current. We have several everyday expressions to cover this skill. We talk of sitting in the other person's chair, standing in the other person's shoes, and looking at the world through other peoples' spectacles. As Sir Douglas Wass (a former Head of the British Civil Service) said 'finesse and diplomacy are an essential ingredient in public service' (cited in Hennessy 1989: 150). Diplomacy with its focus on spanning boundaries and facilitating interaction is an old art in a new context; the skills of diplomacy lie at the heart of network governance.

### Political nous

The dictionary definition of craft also talks of the skill of deceiving others as in 'the permanent secretary was unequalled in his guile and cunning'. 'Public administrators need to be "crafty" to fulfil their responsibilities' (Berkley and Rouse 2009: 18). They practice 'politics' with a small 'p'. The dark arts of politics are not the sole preserve of the elected politician (see Meltsner 1990; Powell 2010). The public servant may be neutral between political parties but they are not neutral either in the service of their department or their minister. As is amply

demonstrated by the British TV programme, *Yes Minister*, problems arise when the minister's and the department's interests diverge. That is the exception, not the rule. Working out how to get on with the minister is seen as a core skill by public servants. Not building a working relationship with the minister is a mark of failure (Rhodes 2011: 120).

Top public servants talk about their 'political antennae' (Rhodes 2011: 121). They express frustration when they have ministers less adroit than themselves:

If you spend your whole life in the Civil Service you actually have a very good idea about politics, not about being party political, I'm completely un-party political ... but you develop a feel for the political and so the Ministers that really give you a thrill I suppose are those who are very strategic ... and also are good at basic political arts. You get frustrated when they do such stupid things and you are thinking well how could they do this, how could people who've had a lifetime of this profession, how could they make such a mess of the politics, which I suppose is quite funny.

They have a wide view of politics. They do not mean party politics and the party caucus. They may be unable to resist the temptation to gossip about such matters but they do not take part. Rather, 'politics' refers to the politics of public administration, the core executive, parliament and the media. Every political-administrator must defend their minister and their department in parliament. They must ask, 'What will this look like on the front page of *The Daily Telegraph*?' The art is coping. The aim is survival. Their work is 'about stability. Keeping things going, preventing anarchy, stopping society falling to bits. Still being here tomorrow' (Lynn and Jay 1984: 454).

Learning from experience is at the heart of prudence and it is how public servants pick up their political nous. The point is appreciated in theory by a former Australian prime minister who saw public service experience as the ‘ideal’ training and preparation for the job of his Chief of Staff (Howard 2001). Yet, in practice, fewer and fewer public servants have experience in the Prime Minister’s Office. Departments no longer have staff with experience of working in the networks at the heart of government. Conversely, these core networks lack knowledge about departments. Elsewhere, rotations in ministerial and prime ministerial offices are an essential developmental pathway for officials and a source of practical wisdom for politicians. For example, Goetz (1997: 770) suggests that, for Germany, postings to the Chancellery; the political support units of executive leaders; and the parliamentary parties in the Bundestag, which employ Federal ministerial officials on temporary leave, all foster acquiring political craft by German officials. Such postings are an important training ground for future top civil servants. A posting:

‘exposes younger officials at a relatively early stage in their career to pressures and expectations with which top administrators are routinely confronted: the need to think and act politically; ... [and] the capacity to draw on extensive networks of information and communication that cut across institutional boundaries.

Institutional labels will change but all core executives have roughly equivalent opportunities for aspirants for the top jobs to learn from experience and to be socialised into the rules of the political game. Political nous is a core part of a political-administrator’s craft.

Of course, reducing the craft of the public servant to seven skills over-simplifies. As I said at the outset, without original fieldwork, we do not know what we do not know.<sup>8</sup> For example, public servants compare stories using tacit knowledge embedded in such words as ‘sound’, ‘judgement’, ‘experience’ and ‘safe pair of hands’. They communicate understood, shared but tacit, not transparent, meaning. Beyond that we have little or no information about how such comparisons are made or the rules of engagement for forensic interrogations. Also, I have separated the skills for ease of exposition. In practice, they are warp and weft. Where does diplomacy end and judgement begin? How do, you counsel a minister without calling on your political nous? Finally, my analysis diverts attention away from the most important skill of all; the ability to choose between and manage the mix of skills. At the heart of their craft is the ability to learn from experience and alter the mix of skills to fit both the specific context in which they work, and the person for whom they work

### **Conclusions: it’s the mix of old and new that matters**

It would be foolish to advocate the waste of public money. Better management that seeks to enhance economy, efficiency and effectiveness is like mom and apple pie; everyone agrees it is a good thing so it is hard to criticise. Network governance requires new skills in managing the mix of bureaucracy, markets and networks. Such meta-governing involves policy narratives, boundary spanning and collaborative leadership. But in adopting these new skills, we must not forget that traditional skills remain essential. Traditional, NPM and NPG skills all remain relevant. It is not a question of traditional skills versus the new skills of network

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<sup>8</sup> The subject lends itself to ethnographic fieldwork using a combination of ethnographic interviews, focus groups and para-ethnography. Para-ethnography involves a critical reading of technical documents to reconstruct a decision that is carried out by both the ethnographer and key informants as intellectual partners. The partner is an expert working in technical, professional institutional settings such as a public bureaucracy. The product is a thick description of the tacit and symbolic knowledge in the documents (Aronoff and Kubik 2013: 46-48).

governance. It is a question of what works; of what skills fit in a particular context. The pendulum has swung too far for too long towards the new and the fashionable. I argue for the pendulum to swing back towards bureaucracy and the traditional skills of bureaucrats as part of the repertoire of governing (see also Goodsell 2004; Olsen 2006). It also suggests a move away from ‘one size fits all’ reforms. Such reforms do not fit a public service confronted with vastly different tasks. Perhaps we need to train a *cadre* for each skill set and that training should include a *stage* that gives them the opportunity to master these several skills on the job.

I do not believe the bureaucracies of yesteryear were a golden era, only that they had some virtues. Many top public servants have such characteristics as conservatism, scepticism, elitism and arrogance (Plowden 1994: 21-3, 74). I know there are limits to learning from experience. As March (2010: 114) concludes ‘learning from experience is an imperfect instrument for finding truth’. It is ambiguous, constructed and contested. But so is learning from the social sciences. I know that other academic colleagues have also discussed the neo-Weberian State of today. For example, Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011: 22 and 118-22) argue that such countries as France and Germany are modernising ‘the traditional state apparatus so that it becomes more professional, more efficient and more responsive to citizens’. There are some business-like reforms but the state remains with its rules, methods and culture; authority continues to be ‘exercised through a disciplined hierarchy of impartial officials’. The difference between my argument and their argument is as simple as it is obvious. They are talking about what is changing in ‘traditional’ Continental states and I am talking about what we need to preserve in the ‘core NPM states’ of Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and the USA.

Why do we need a preservation order on the public service? Why are the traditional skills important? The short answer is because the traditional craft assumes the primacy of politics. Ministers are not managers. It is not why they went into politics. Only a minority take

an interest. This simple brute fact undermines reform. The civil service exists to give ministers what they want and most do not want anything to do with management reform. At best, it is not a priority. At worst, it is not even on the radar as both confront a world of high risk and 24/7 media coverage that dominates their everyday lives. They live in a closed world of overlapping roles and responsibilities. The distinctions between policy and management, politician and civil servant are meaningless when confronted by the imperative to cope and survive. Political-administrators' are dependent on one another to carry out their respective roles, each role one side of the same coin. Every rude surprise demonstrates their dependence. They live in a twilight zone; the middle ground between light and shadow, between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge.<sup>9</sup> It is a cocoon of willed ordinariness that exists to protect the minister. Private offices, staffers and top public servants exist to domesticate trouble, to defuse problems, and to take the emotion out of a crisis. Protocols are the key to managing this pressurised existence. The political antennae point out the hole to the minister before he or she falls in. They pull him or her out of the hole afterwards, and argue that he or she never fell in. Routines are a way of making a complex and often anarchic world seem manageable. They are an exercise in willed ordinariness.

Critics of the civil service for the slow pace of change should look instead to ministers as the main wellspring of change in government to explain the slow pace of change. In the eyes of both ministers and senior civil servants, the job of ministers had not been transformed by either NPM or NPG. They continue to live in a world of blurred accountability in which both ministers and top civil servants are political-administrators dependent on one another if they are to succeed. Public servants recognise both the dependence and the critical role of ministers:

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<sup>9</sup> Excerpts from the opening narration of the TV series 'The Twilight Zone' (1959).

Accountability is the central issue but it is difficult. The current arrangements are fraught with ambiguities – and remember this suits both sides. The accountability fudge we have now protects ministers and officials. Ministers can say ‘not me gov’, while officials hide behind them.

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 (senior officials cited in in Lodge and Rogers 2006: ix and 63).

There is another nettle to grasp. Pollitt and Bouckaert (1981: 181) opine that the next round of reforms could focus on the induction and training of ministers and changing the framework of incentives and penalties for ministers. Just like public servants, politicians also need to learn from experience. As Rhodes and Tiernan (2014: 215) conclude, there is little capacity for partisan learning in Australian government (and on training politicians see Hartley 2014). Perhaps politicians are the problem. It is not civil reform that should be at the top of the reform agenda but ministerial reform to ensure they have the array of skills necessary for high office.

In the 1950s, Sir Edward Bridges wrote that it was ‘the duty of the civil servant to give his Minister the fullest benefit of the storehouse of departmental experience, and to let the waves of the practical philosophy wash against ideas put forward by his ministerial masters’. Bridges identifies four ‘skills or qualities’ needed by civil servants. First, they must have ‘long experience of a particular field’. Second, there are the specialised skills or arts of the administrator; of knowing ‘how and where to go to find reliable knowledge’, assessing ‘the expertise of others at its true worth’, spotting ‘the strong and weak points in any situation at short notice, and advising ‘on how to handle a complex situation’. Third, the civil servant

should ‘study difficult subjects intensively and objectively, with the same disinterested desire to find the truth at all costs’. Finally, the civil servant must ‘combine the capacity for taking a somewhat coldly judicial attitude with the warmer qualities essential to managing large numbers of staff’ (Bridges 1950: 50, 51, 52 and 55-57).

In the 2000s, the head of the Australian public service concluded:

We have something unique to offer in it, including:

- the capacity to stand aside from vested interests and to properly support governments focusing on governing in the national interest;
- experience in what works in the Commonwealth Government and what doesn’t; and
- being accountable to current and future governments for our actions

(Watt 2012: 5)

The quotes span sixty years, yet both public servants insist there is a distinct and distinctive craft. Despite the many challenges posed by the various waves of ‘reform’, their profession continues to offer counselling, stewardship, prudence, probity, judgement, diplomacy and political nous. These quotes do not represent special pleading by the public service. They are descriptions of the craft of public servants. Even committed reformers need to understand the continuing relevance of these old skills to the new world of network governance.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The traditional craft will also help governments to manage network governance, but that is the subject for a separate paper.

Given that we so love dichotomies like steering not rowing, let me suggest that NPM is about the low politics of implementation and the craft is about the high politics of serving the minister. We have had an era of thinking small. It is time to think big again and return to the craft; to statecraft.

## Epilogue

My first foray into IPAA territory was in Brisbane on the 29<sup>th</sup> November to 1<sup>st</sup> December 1995. I provided the conference summation. Despite the lapse of nineteen years, I remember it well. I contrasted head kicking with diplomacy as management styles. At the end, I received generous applause but doubt surfaced as three female Queensland public servants descended on me declaiming, 'It will not do Professor Rhodes, it will not do' (shades of Jane Austen and 'Badly done, Emma. Badly done'). Now I don't know if there are any members of the Queensland public service left today let alone attending this conference, but I do know the female of the species is a formidable breed. I know when to be calm and not argue. I was polite. They continued, 'they won't listen to you. That diplomacy is "girlie talk"' (their words, not mine). I expressed surprise. Later, I mused about our tunnel vision on the public sector and its skills and potentialities. I fear I may have returned to equally fallow ground today. The rational, managerial approach has predominated since the 1970s, producing little beyond the civil service reform syndrome. We do not need more of the same. We need a different approach to reform. Recovering a past we are losing is, paradoxically, one way forward.

I'm from Yorkshire. When I give a lecture there, if they like it, they don't clap, they let me live. So, I hope you let me live at least long enough to drink a Margaret River chardonnay - an Evans & Tate Redbrook Chardonnay 2011 will do nicely.

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