After Managerialism What?
The Return to Political and Strategic
Priorities

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The paper attempts to identify future directions for public administration in the context of changes in the political system, and especially changes in the executive branch of government. Administrative reforms in the past few decades have been characterized by the New Public Management, governance, public participation, empowerment, etc. At the same time, the political executive itself has been undergoing a range of significant changes. Also, the role of the political executive within the political process has been changing, especially within parliamentary systems. »Presidentialization« of politics in parliamentary systems is connected with domination of prime ministers over their cabinets and political processes in general. The result of such administrative and political processes is a paradoxical position of the political leadership that concentrates more power on the peak of the political system, while it has di-

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minished power over administration and implementation. However, there are some mechanisms for maintaining many of the gains of modern administrative reforms while allowing firmer political steering. Four of them are analysed: soft steering, priority setting, the use of a »golden thread«, and performance management. Maintenance of a career and stable civil service is crucial for resolving disjuncture between current political and administrative processes.

Key words: public administration, administrative reforms, the New Public Management, democratic governance, political executives, presidentialization of parliamentary systems, public participation, civil service

1. Introduction

The past several decades have been ones of substantial and continuing change in the public sector (Aucoin, 1990; Peters and Savoie, 2000). These individual reforms are far too numerous to enumerate and evaluate here, although the changes are usually encapsulated in terms of the New Public Management (Christensen and Laegreid, 2007). While these market-oriented reforms of New Public Management (NPM) were the most commonly discussed aspects of reform, there also have been numerous attempts to make the public sector more participatory and democratic. These efforts have included notable efforts within a number of countries to enhance many aspects of »citizen engagement« in the processes of governing (Wyman, Shulman and Ham, 2000; Pierre and Eymeri-Douzanes, 2011).

Despite the numerous attempts to enhance participation, there are a number of questions remaining about the capacity of the public to control government and its bureaucracy effectively through democratic means. This paper will examine some of those attempts, especially those that have been attempts to ameliorate the worst effects of NPM. Not only have these reforms attempted to foster greater participation per se but they have also attempted to enhance steering and control from political executives. This paper will examine the attempts to enhance political controls, and also to move the public sector toward a more strategic style of governing.

The administrative reforms have produced some demonstrable benefits for the public sector and for citizens. Although citizens in many countries remain sceptical about government, or in many cases have merely grown even more sceptical (see Norris, 2011), about the performance of the public sector, there does appear to have been some improvements in the services delivered (Rouban, 2001). If nothing else, the emphasis on performance and »serving the customer« that has been central to the New Public Management has enabled the public to identify somewhat more clearly how well services are being provided, and how much those services have been improving over time.[1] Instruments used to assess service delivery, such as performance management, may be flawed in many ways (Pollitt, 2009; Bouckaert and Peters, 2002) but again they also emphasize the need for the public sector.

The emphasis on citizen engagement, and the associated involvement of social actors in making and implementing public policies (Torfing et al., 2012), has also improved the democratic performance of many administrative systems (see Fountain, 2001). Most of these opportunities for participation are relevant primarily for organized groups in the civil society, but there are also opportunities for individual involvement with the output side of the public sector. Given the declining relevance of conventional forms of participation in many countries, there has been some shift toward the administrative system as a locus of democracy (Peters, 2010). While this form of democracy does not necessarily replace conventional democratic participation, opportunities to participate directly with the bureaucracy do complement those other forms.

This paper will attempt to locate future directions for public administration in the context of even broader changes in the political system, and especially changes in the executive branch of government. While the public administration community has been concentrating attention on the numerous reforms within that part of government, it might be easy to ignore (as scholars if not as citizens) the significant changes occurring in others. I will be attempting to link these seemingly contradictory directions of change and discuss their impacts on the role that the senior public service plays in governing.

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[1] The transformation of »citizens« into »customers« has decidedly negative normative implications for democracy, but this basic emphasis on providing services does have more positive implications.

It is always crucial to remember that public administration is indeed public. The public bureaucracy is a central component of the political system, rather than merely a technical and managerial activity (Olsen, 2008). The public bureaucracy is linked intimately to the political executive (Peters, 1987; Jenkins, 2008), both as it provides advice to those political leaders and it is responsible for implementing the programs of ministers and other political executives. Further, the public bureaucracy remains, even after the increased use of non-governmental actors, the principal source of contact between the State and members of the public. Public administration therefore becomes the mechanism through which the public receives subtle, and perhaps not so subtle, indications about the way in which governments regard their position as citizens and as »customers« (Serra, 1995).

2. Conflicts in Reforming Public Administration

Much of the discussion of public administration during the past several decades has been, in essence, directed at promoting change from the bottom up. All the reforms associated with the New Public Management, as well as most of the »governance« reforms have tended to emphasize the importance of lower echelon public servants and the connection between civil society and government. Although the New Public Management has had some emphasis on the role of managers, and even the senior managers, when viewed from the perspective of senior political officials, the emphasis has been on individuals much further down in the governing system, the ultimate ambition of the approach is to enhance quality in the provision of public services.

Indeed, part of the political logic of the New Public Management has been to denigrate the role of political leaders and to extol the presumed capacity of public managers to provide more effective leadership for, and control over, public policy. These reforms have included diverting a good deal of the activity for providing public services to non-governmental actors and to relatively autonomous agencies within the public sector (Verhoest, 2005). These reforms, and associated decentralization within the public sector itself, have tended to move power out of the centre of government and apparently minimize the control that politicians have over policy.

The alternative pattern of reform in the public sector, that has emphasized the participation of citizens directly in administration and policy-making, has had some of the same consequences for the capacity of political leaders to steer public policy. There is a variety of mechanisms for involving the public in decisions, e.g. participatory budgeting (Tellier, 2011), and for enhancing the involvement of lower-echelon employees in the operations of their organizations (Vigoda and Golembiewski, 2001). These reforms have enhanced the democratic quality of public administration but they have also tended to enhance the autonomy of public organizations, and consequently have tended to reduce another element of democratic steering, i.e. the capacity of elected leaders to control policy.

The administrative reforms of the past several decades have rather had the consequence of attempting to empower a number of actors in the administrative process. These changes have in various ways and through various means intended to empower senior managers, lower echelon administrators, clients, and ordinary citizens. As we have pointed out previously (Peters and Pierre, 2000), these reforms have tended to empower everyone and in the process may heave laid the basis for political conflicts within organizations and between organizations and their publics. Further, the reforms have tended to disaggregate the public sector to the extent that the inherent difficulties of coordination within the public sector become exacerbated, and collective governance even more constrained than under the traditional forms of governance.

3. Public Administration from the Top Down

As already noted, there has been a great deal of reform in public administration that appears to have been conducted in isolation from the political context within which that administration functions. At the same time that administrative systems have been reformed, the political executive has itself been undergoing a range of significant changes in its structures, in its functions, and also in how it interacts with public administration (see Dahlström, Peters and Pierre, 2011; Hood and Lodge, 2008). Further, and perhaps most importantly, the role of the political executive within the political process has been changing, especially within parliamentary systems.[2]

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[2] This is the recent manifestation of a long-term change in the relative powers of parliament.

3.1. The Changing Executive

The recent transformations of the political executive in parliamentary systems is usually referred to as the »presidentialization« of these systems (Poguntke and Webb, 2007; Bevir and Rhodes, 2006). In this political context presidentialization means that prime ministers have ceased to be »*primus inter pares*« (if they ever really were) and instead have come to dominate their cabinets and the political process more generally. This »presidentialization« of politics[3] in parliamentary systems has been associated with not only the trappings of political power-expanded staffs, media officers and media attention, in these offices but also the growth of real powers. The capacity of prime ministers to control policymaking within cabinet has increased in many political systems, as have decree powers to govern autonomously in some instances (Carey and Shugart, 1998).

Prime ministers have gained control of much of the decision-making apparatus in cabinet and parliament and also have control over their political parties. The desire of individual politicians to retain their positions and hopefully climb up the career ladder makes them relatively easy to control by the party leadership and thus majorities in parliament can be solidified. That pattern of dominance by premiers is accentuated by the tendency of major political parties in parliamentary systems to become »cartel parties« (Katz and Mair, 2009). That is, they have become even more concerned with maintaining office, and in the process minimizing their representational roles. In coalition systems this tendency can extend to downplaying the role of opposition in parliament so that the party can be considered a reliable coalition partner.[4] Further, as holding office becomes more important, the costs of defection for any individual politician become greater.

The basic argument then is that parliamentary democracies have been translated into cabinet democracies, and cabinet democracies have become prime ministerial democracies. The political focus on these execu-

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[3] This term as applied to parliamentary systems is a serious misnomer. Presidents are in many ways weaker officials than are prime ministers, especially contemporary prime ministers. Presidents generally lack controls over their legislative branches and hence are less capable of making definitive policy decisions than are prime ministers – especially prime ministers in majoritarian political systems such as (usually) the United State or Canada. See Peters (1997).

[4] An increasing amount of the work of opposition therefore is carried out by flash parties often built around a single issue and around an individual, perhaps not running in more than one or two elections.

tives has tended to alter the internal dynamics of governing and to make parliamentary accountability more difficult. Although there are some tendencies for change in that direction, there are marked differences across political systems. The majoritarian (Lijphart, 1994), Westminster systems appear to have gone the furthest in that direction, while more consensual regimes with coalition systems have changed less. Even among those systems, however, there are differences. Systems with a *Ressortsprinzip* such as Germany or Denmark give individual ministers structural power to make decisions on their own, while those such as Sweden insist on a stronger sense of the unity of governments.

Thus, within government itself, ministers and especially prime ministers have acquired substantial political power, and power over the internal machinery of government. In addition to their role in managing the political process, they have also built policy capacity that is distinct from that which conventionally had been run through the civil service. The proliferation of SPADs (special advisers) in government is one manifestation of the attempt to politicize policy-making and to use political »spin« in the management of governing. Importantly much of the role of these advisors is political rather than political analytic so that »spin« is indeed major part of the role (see Eichbaum and Shaw, 2010).

The administrative reforms over the past several decades have also influenced the nature of the political executives. On the one hand, the emphasis on management as opposed to policy advice within these reforms has denigrated and downgraded the policy capacity of the senior public service in many countries. Management has improved in many cases, but that has been bought by creating a civil service that often is less capable of providing »frank and fearless«, and well-reasoned, advice to their nominal political masters. Therefore, those political executives have had to rely more on their own sources of advice, and that advice has become increasingly politicized (Fawcett and Gay, 2010).

In addition, the emphasis on public participation in governing and policymaking has tended to create some more competitors for influence over policy, and an increased range of policy ideas that may be considered in the policy process. The political executives may have their own spindoctors hard at work, but there are other political organizations, and even more civil society organizations, at work also trying to gain control over the discourses used to define and to control policy. The democratization of administration and other policy processes therefore also tend to weaken the capacity of political executives to control policy, even as they appear ever more powerful within the structures of government themselves.

Finally, the disaggregation of the political and bureaucratic executives into numerous autonomous agencies, as well as the use of the multiple means for non-governmental organizations in delivering public services, have had a significant effect on the capacity of political executives to control public policy. This effect can be most obvious at implementation stage of the policy process, but is also true during formulation of policy.[5] This »decentring« of government provides another source of policy direction and also creates that many more autonomous actors within the process that determine choices.

Given the above changes, the centre of government has been engaged in a number of efforts to build not only policy capacity but also the capacity to coordinate and integrate the policies and programmes being implemented (and developed) by more devolved structures. This has meant developing formal structures or procedures to handle these issues (Runio and Kekkonen, 2011; Smith, 2011) or simply emphasizing the need to »recreate the centre« of the system. No matter what the character of the response, there has been a perceived need to restore important aspects of the political power of the centre.

At the extreme the movement toward greater direct participation by the public in policymaking, and the use of more or less autonomous actors, has been manifested in »interactive governance« (Torfing et al., 2012). In numerous political systems, especially those in Northern Europe, a number of policy areas are heavily influenced, some would argue dominated, by social actors who are capable of making and implementing public policies by cooperative means, rather than the more hierarchical means usually associated with the public sector. This mechanism for making and delivering services tends to place even great barriers in the way of political elites who want to steer governance.

The separation of the two groups of executives – political and bureaucratic – represents yet another case of mutual empowerment in governing. Within the political group, executive cabinets and especially prime ministers have definitely been empowered. They have built powerful political and governing institutions around themselves, and appear capable of controlling much of the action within the political side of governing. At the

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[5] It is crucial to remember here that »mere implementation« is not that, but is crucial for shaping the nature of the policies being delivered. The policy as implemented is arguably much more important than is the policy that resides in formal papers in cabinet or parliament.

same time, within the bureaucracy, New Public Management reforms as well as democratizing reforms have tended to empower many actors.

Both of these groups believe that they have both the legitimacy and the capacity to govern, and to govern well. At the same time, however, they also express some perceived problems in the state of contemporary governance. This tendency to identify governance problems has been especially true for political executives, who have expressed their perception that many aspects of governing are beyond their capacity to control. The public administrators involved in this process at times express concerns over their loss of influence over policy, and also (somewhat paradoxically) about the demands to manage policy.

As Richard Rose (1976) noted there are numerous constraints on the capacity of political leaders to control the remainder of the political system. These included the lack of policy expertise, management skills and time on the part of the political executives. In the decades that have followed the publication of Rose's book the difficulties in governing from the centre may have, if anything, increased as policy problems and the delivery systems associated with them have become increasingly complex. The development and use of policy »shops« in the executive has varied across time, with the period of presidentialization being marked as much by political as by genuine policy advice.

Further, there was no guarantee that the remainder of the department would want to go along with the policies of a minister. One of the prevailing stereotypes of public administration is of a collection of permanent officials who have their own ideas about policy and who are not about to be swayed by the wishes of their political masters. That stereotype is generally overstated quite dramatically, but yet it must be said that departments do have their perspectives on policy and will attempt to move their ministers in particular directions, at times saving the minister from his or her own best instincts. That stereotype becomes even less valid as the administrative and policy-delivery systems become more decentred, and more autonomous.

This general decline in the apparent capacity of political executives to control their ministries has had several recent counter-trends, brought on in part by the economic crisis beginning in 2008. One has been a general centralization of government, perceived to be necessary to cope with the disruptions of that economic crisis. In the extreme, the power of central actors such as prime ministers and ministers of finance has been strengthened by the International Monetary Fund and the European Un-

ion. Perhaps less obviously, the number and autonomy of agencies and other decentralized structures has been reduced as governments attempt to ensure their capacity to work together.

In this rather paradoxical world of the contemporary political executives, many are attempting to find ways of controlling policy the same way in which they can control their own offices. Interviews with several leaders in central agencies in a range of countries indicate that chief executives find it difficult to exercise the type of control over governance that they expected to be capable of prior to election. They have a great deal of power within their own political executive but that power appears to run into the sand once they attempt to motivate the remainder of the executive.

4. Knitting Together Strands of Change

These diverging patterns of governance and the role of public administration create an important paradox of governance in the contemporary world. On the one hand, the continuing expansion of the use of non-governmental actors in governing, and delegation to sub-national political systems, has meant that the political leadership in governments are »steering at a distance« (Kickert, 1995), and the chains of control that exist in contemporary governance have become attenuated. On the other hand, however, cabinets and especially prime ministers have come to dominate the political institutions of government, so that power within the political system has gravitated upward to the peak of the political executive.

The paradox then is that prime minister appears to have, and indeed has, immense power within the executive, but at the same time often has diminished power over the remainder of the political system. This paradoxical position of the political leadership in contemporary government has both democratic and administrative consequences. The democratic element of this paradox is to some extent an extension of problems that have existed in parliamentary regimes for some time. As Rose pointed out when we go to the polls on election day, we may think that we are selecting policies, but there have been many barriers to that model of democracy actually functioning. And those barriers have if anything been increasing as a function of administrative reforms (see Dahlström, Peters and Pierre, 2011).

Even with the power and the trappings of power that ministers and especially prime ministers have created for themselves over the past several

decades, they may be at something of a disadvantage in making public policies. The centre of government has always been political, but has if anything become more political. That is, the twenty-four hour news cycle, the increased transparency of governing because of the media, and the focus on prime ministers tends to drive political concerns to the top of the list and issues of good policy (especially long-term policy) and good governance somewhat further down the list of priorities. The »Court Government« metaphor that Savoie (2008) developed captures this rather inward looking style of a good deal of contemporary governing.

If the above arguments about the seeming disjuncture of power and policy within the executive branch have any validity, then the civil service, and especially the senior civil service, has some major challenges. While this institution has always been central to governing, it becomes even more so as it must somehow »knit« together disparate strands of the contemporary governance system into a more coherent and integrated format for governing. This must be done in a manner that preserves some of the gains from improved management but can add to that policy direction and that can emphasize »the primacy of politics«.

The civil service has traditionally been the central lynchpin connecting the political elements of the executive branch with the administrative. In a more traditional version of governance than we now typically see, administrative elites such as Deputy Ministers or Permanent Secretaries were crucial in that linkage, conveying the political authority of the minister downward into the remainder of government, and conveying ideas and the »departmental view« upwards to the political echelons. These officials required the confidence of both groups of actors to be successful and had to function as honest brokers between the wishes of the political master and the established routines, and policy wishes, of the department.

This role of linkage between the top and the bottom of government has been to some extent degraded by the politicization within the administrative system, and the increasing use of political officials to perform this task of connecting the levels within the public sector.[6] That politicization takes many forms (Peters, forthcoming) but in all instances involves the substitution of political values for those of the civil service, and the loss of the autonomy and professionalism of the civil service.

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[6] This linkage role has been played by political appointees in systems such as France and Belgium that have extensive ministerial *cabinets* (Brans and Pelgrims, 2006). While many of these officials in the *cabinets* come from administration, they adopt a political role serving their minister.

The emerging demands on the civil service in these processes of linking the political and the administrative will be even more important. And that must be done within a context in which there is greater separation, structurally and behaviourally, between the two segments of the executive. And in addition, it must be accomplished in an era in which many participants in public administration have become somewhat more autonomous in general, and therefore more resistant to being given direction whether through the civil service or through political officials coming from the prime minister.

4.1. Soft Steering

One mechanism for addressing the needs of maintaining many of the gains of managerial reforms while allowing for greater political steering is the development of »soft steering«. The concept of »soft law« has been developed to describe (among other cases) patterns of governing within the European Union (Mörth, 2004). This idea of »soft law« is analogous to Salamon's (2001) discussion of the »new governance« meaning that rather than relying on command and control instruments for governing, a shift toward less directive means of steering and indirect control in government is occurring. Salamon's discussion was primarily in the context of popular resistance to »command and control« policy instruments, but the logic may be extended to other forms of direct intervention.

By »soft steering« we mean the use of instruments such as benchmarks, voluntary agreements, negotiated settlements and a range of other instruments that allow the participants in the policymaking process, and especially those involved in implementation, to have some latitude in how they translate general government goals into action. These actors therefore are being steered, but they have mainly the general directions for their action determined rather than the details.

The use of soft steering enables political leaders to influence, if not control, policy while at the same time also maintaining the autonomy of many actors to make their own decisions about how exactly to achieve the goals that are set. This balancing of autonomy and control may be difficult to maintain in a manner that is agreeable to all the participants. Organizations and managers will always complain about the control being imposed by the political leadership, while political leaders may complain about the »shirking and sabotage« of the administrators (Brehm and Gates, 1997).

4.2. Priority Setting

Another mechanism for steering from the centre without engaging in direct command and control mechanisms over the processes, or to politicize the administrative process, is to implement a »priority setting« style of governance. That is, rather than attempting to make detailed choices about policy and the administration of programmes the centre of government may focus more on the principal priorities of government and allow the organizations involved to make more of their own decisions about implementation.

The attempts of some political leaders to respond to the New Public Management through bringing back together a range of programmes and structures that had been disaggregated through the reforms of NPM have paraded under a number of banners – Joined up Government, the Whole of Government, Restoring the Centre – but have shared a common theme of attempting to produce more coherent solutions to public policy problems (Pollitt, 2003). This means that governments establish their major priorities and then link the various programs and ministries into those more encompassing goals.

The coordination strategy is an important mechanism for asserting the priorities of the centre on the remainder of government, but it goes only so far in permitting those leaders from imposing their political priorities.[7] If governments can move from a more passive coordination approach to a more strategic approach, then they are more capable of imposing their goals on the policy system, but again do so through less directive means. Not only will such an approach provide opportunities for policy leadership for political executives but it also provides greater opportunities for attempts at comprehensive solutions to policy problems.

The senior civil service would play a central role in translating the strategic directions from the political leadership into action. Strategic statements about policy and government remain just that – statements – unless they are implemented. The senior civil service then must translate what may be rather abstract policy preferences into effective action. That implies not only providing leadership to their own organizations but also working across structures to provide more comprehensive governance and policy direction for the government as a whole.

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[7] Fritz Scharpf (1997) argued that governments engaged in negative coordination in which the actors involved knew what each other was doing, and in positive coordination in which they had that knowledge and attempted to cooperate. A strategic approach would extend beyond even the positive approach to coordination to ask questions about the capacity to integrate policies around comprehensive and longer-term goals of the political system.

4.3. The Golden Thread

Yet another means of approaching the general issue of soft-steering is to use a »golden thread« to attempt to exert effective control without excessive intervention into processes that are intended to be more autonomous. This term has been used by the Danish Ministry of Finance (see Jensen, 2006) to identify their strategy of maintaining a relatively few lines of control over devolved processes, especially those devolved to networks of social actors (see Sorensen and Torfing, 2007). Although the threads available to the MoF are relatively few, they are powerful and do enable a good deal of steering of the policies and programmes.

To some extent the same strategy has been applied in steering the numerous devolved agencies that have become common in administrative structures around the world. The research that has been done on these organizations and their autonomy indicates that while they may be granted substantial autonomy in a number of areas, their controlling organizations – usually a ministry – maintains control over some aspects of the budget, or of finance, or perhaps of policy so that the agencies that were designed to be autonomous can function in that manner while at the same time also conforming to the more general policies of the government.

4.4. Performance Management

Although performance management has been closely linked with the agenda of the New Public Management, it can also be seen as a component for the return to steering from the centre. On the one hand, the emphasis on performance does tend to drive the actions of organizations and individuals within the public sector. This mechanism can be conceived as a means for imposing rather stringent controls over the employees in the public sector, and use fear as much as more positive motivations to affect the behaviours of individuals.

A somewhat less directive conceptualization of performance management is also feasible. While much of the traditional practice of public management[8] has been rather hierarchical and directive, performance manage-

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[8] Even much of the New Public Management appears to assume a rather directive and hierarchical forms of control within the public sector. If the managers are to be allowed to manager, or perhaps ever made to manage, then they need to have the instruments through which they can exercise their control.

ment can be used as a means of providing general policy directions while simultaneously permitting individuals and their organizations to make decisions about the means of achieving stated goals. Performance management can be seen as specifying broad policy goals and then permitting a good deal of latitude in the manner of achieving them. For example, one of the policy goals of a sitting government may be to improve »customer« service in a policy area. This goal may be achieved through investing heavily in information technology or through investing in personnel, with managers and their political masters having some opportunity for choice.

As well as being able to provide softer versions of steering to the public sector, performance management has the potential to assist in enhancing the accountability of the administrative system. Most conventional forms of accountability have tended to share with conventional forms of governance a directive and detailed character. That style of accountability certainly has its purposes, but also can focus on political embarrassment and even the minutiae of administration rather than asking bigger and more important questions about overall performance, and about the improvement of performance. As with the basic logic of soft-steering, this form of »soft accountability« may in the end produce equally effective results.

5. Summary and Conclusions

The academic separation of disciplines and sub-disciplines at times masks important linkages in the phenomena occurring in the »real world«. In the case discussed here, the failure of scholars interested in the political executive and those interested in public administration tends to separate the two sides of a very important coin in governing.[9] For effective governance these two elements of the executive branch of government must be able to work together effectively. They are partners in both making and in implementing public policies even though much conventional discussion of public administration has tended to emphasize their separation rather than their integration.

When one does begin to consider these two elements of the executive branch together, the individual developments over the past several decades present a rather paradoxical picture, and indeed even a contradic-

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    [9] Donald Savoie is one of the relatively few scholars who works on both sides of this academic divide.

tory picture. On the one hand, the »presidentialization« of parliamentary governments has tended to emphasize the importance of prime ministers in controlling parliament and cabinet, and portrays these leaders as dominant figures in the political landscape. While this literature on prime ministers may exaggerate the powers, and the changes in powers, of prime ministers, it is important to note the changing character of political executives.

On the other hand, the administrative literature with its stress on the autonomy of many public organizations seems to say that prime ministers may have become the Gullivers of their political systems – presumed giants bound by numerous small constraints so that they are really not as effective as they might appear. For the purposes of this paper most of those constraints arise from the de-centring of many governance processes and the autonomy granted to many other organizations within the executive branch. Thus, these seemingly dominant figures within the policy process may actually not be capable of translating their wishes into effective action to the extent that they could when there was a more traditional conceptualization of the role of the public service.

When we do put these two trends within the public sector together, there appears to be a disjuncture between these two realities, and a practical need to bring the two trends together. The basic argument therefore is that there is a need for some actors or institutions to knit together the executive into a more coherent instrument for governance, and that the civil service is the most appropriate institution for that purpose. To this point in the process of transformation much of the reaction from the centre of government has been to attempt to utilize direct political control over other parts of government.[10] That strategy has produced both normative objections and empirical weaknesses in managing the public sector, and has tended to further to denigrate the traditional functions of the civil service.

The implications of these transformations of both politics and administration for the senior civil service are to some extent to restore some of its traditional role as the link between the political executives and the processes of implementation and service delivery. That role of linkage, however, has become even more difficult with the increased involvement of market and social actors in the processes of governing. The senior civil

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[10] This politicization of the public sector has been become more pervasive than one might expect in the presumably neutral administrative systems found in most industrialized democracies.

service has always been in the middle, but now is even more in the position of balancing a range of competing pressures and demands. This is, perhaps, even greater justification for emphasizing the maintenance of a career and stable civil service.

Stressing the importance of the senior civil service is not to deny »the primacy of politics«, but in some ways is a means of confirming that primacy. That is, emphasizing the importance of the civil service linking the policy choices of governments to the implementation permits some of the soft-steering of the administration discussed above. The role of the senior public service may be altered from direct control toward those softer mechanisms of controls, but the fundamental linkage required for administering the system is little altered. It is a question of steering more cleverly, and more softly, rather than not steering at all.

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