

*BUREAUCRATIC AUTONOMY,
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE,
AND HABITUATION
Politicians and Independent
Administrative Bodies
in the Netherlands*

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What really does change when a bureaucratic agency is created? What will the nature of a new agency's interactions be with political and administrative actors in its environment? Despite the large interest in administrative reform during the past few decades, there has been only little attention given to institutionalization processes that follow the creation of independent public agencies. This article formulates a model of political-bureaucratic adaptation between politicians and newly established agencies. It is built on the concepts of bureaucratic autonomy, administrative culture, and habituation. The model is illustrated with the case of Independent Administrative Bodies in the Netherlands.

Keywords: *bureaucratic autonomy; administrative culture; the Netherlands*

During the past 20 years, students of public administration have been writing extensively on the effects of the so-called new public management (NPM) reforms on the structure and organization of central government. During almost the same period, there was a rise of political science interest in delegation of authority to administrative agencies and the issue of bureaucratic autonomy. The former field has devoted attention to description and evaluation of NPM reforms (Peters & Savoie, 1998) as well as to the causes and consequences of these reforms (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000). The latter field developed theoretical models of delegation and

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agency-politics relationships (Bendor, Glazer, & Hammond, 2001; Moe, 1995) and put them to empirical tests (Epstein & O'Halloran, 1999; Huber & Shipan, 2002). Despite their focus on the creation of new public organizations, both fields have in common that they have given only little attention to what happens after a new agency has been established in terms of the institutionalization of roles and patterns of interaction. This is surprising given the empirical focus of these studies and the assertion put forward by some authors that the establishment of a new agency has a major impact on the political-administrative world (Moe, 1995; Smith, 1999). The goal of this article is to fill in this void. The following questions are central here: What really does change when a bureaucratic agency is created? How do new agencies respond to their environment after they have been established? What will the nature of a new agency's interactions be with political and administrative actors in its environment?

In this article, I propose a model of political-bureaucratic adaptation between politicians and newly established agencies. Several authors have already discussed the issue of political-bureaucratic adaptation in a more general way (Wood & Waterman, 1993); however, they were not specifically interested in adaptation processes following the establishment of new agencies. In general, one can say that a new agency is established as a consequence of a substantial change in public policy: Changes in laws or the enactment of a new statute may require the establishment of new organizational structures or the reorganization of existing organizations, for example, the creation of new units within an existing public organization for the purpose of implementing the new goals of statutes (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). During the 1980s and 1990s, however, organizational reform within the public sector became a policy area on its own (Barzelay, 2001; Pollitt, Bathgate, Caulfield, Smullen, & Talbot, 2001). This makes it all the more interesting and important to look closer at the dynamics that are at play after a new agency is established.

The model I develop here is built on the concepts of bureaucratic autonomy, administrative culture, and habituation and consists of two phases and involves three independent processes. The first phase is the establishment phase and includes two processes. First, the political executive delegates policy making and/or implementation authority to an agency. This delegation is a formal decision, and with delegation the political executive grants the agency a certain degree of formal autonomy. Second, a newly established agency or a bureau within a larger public organization expecting to become an agency undergoes a process of cultural transformation. The second phase concerns the adaptation phase in which

the newly created agency starts interacting with other actors in its environment. Although the agency will have started already to perform its main tasks, it will also be engaged in adapting to its new position and role, thereby seeking stable patterns of interaction between itself and the main actors in the agency's environment. This occurs through a process of habituation.

In the first part of this article, I describe the model. It discusses the concepts of bureaucratic autonomy, administrative culture, and habituation in more depth. The second part of this article presents a case study to illustrate this model. The case study concerns the revolt of a small number of Independent Administrative Bodies (IABs) in the Netherlands in November 2001 against the autonomy-limiting measures that subsequent Dutch cabinets had introduced after the publication of a critical report of the Dutch General Accounting Office. It shows that this revolt was the consequences of decade-long strife between newly established independent agencies with managerial cultures and the government about the real autonomy of these agencies.

THE ESTABLISHMENT PHASE: BUREAUCRATIC AUTONOMY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

BUREAUCRATIC AUTONOMY: FORMAL VERSUS REAL

In his seminal work on bureaucracy, Downs (1967) summed up four possible ways in which bureaucratic agencies can come to life. The first way is the routinization of charisma, which is one of Weber's ideal types (Gerth & Mills, 1958). In this case, a bureaucratic organization emerges as the result of the personal devotion of a group of individuals toward a charismatic leader. The organization that thus emerges serves the goal of perpetuating the ideas of this leader. Second, an entire new bureaucratic agency might be created because of perceived social needs. The agency serves the interests of those who are affected by a social problem and have pressured for the agency's creation. A third possible way is fissure: A bureau within an existing organization splits off from its mother organization when, for example, this particular bureau has become too large in size and function to remain part of the larger organization. Finally, an agency can be created through entrepreneurship, that is, "if a group of men promoting a particular policy . . . gains enough support to establish and

operate a large nonmarket organization devoted to that policy” (Downs, 1967, p. 5).

Whatever their genesis, Downs (1967) continued, agencies face the pending problem of gaining a minimum level of autonomy, which is the capacity to change the agenda and preferences of politicians and the organized public. The first prerequisite for autonomy seems to be the acceptance of the agency by its (political) supporters as well as the beneficiaries of its program. “No bureau survives unless it is continually able to demonstrate that its services are worthwhile to some group with influence over sufficient resources to keep it alive” (Downs, 1967, p. 7). Besides instilling on political authorities and citizens “the belief . . . that agencies can provide benefits, plans, and solutions to national problems found nowhere else in the regime” (p. 14), Carpenter (2002) went on to argue that the legitimacy of agencies “must also be grounded in multiple networks through which agency entrepreneurs can build program coalitions around the policies they favor” (p. 14). A further condition for bureaucratic autonomy is “the extent to which an organization possesses a distinctive area of competence, a clearly demarcated clientele or membership, and undisputed jurisdiction over a function, service, goal, issue or cause” (Clark & Wilson, as cited in Downs, 1967, p. 157).

This real bureaucratic autonomy does not need to correspond with the agency’s formal bureaucratic autonomy. An agency’s formal bureaucratic autonomy only stipulates such things as the kind of the decisions the executive leadership of an agency is entitled to take, to whom it is to report about these, and how its agency is funded for all this.¹ When delegating authority to an agency, rational politicians tend to guard themselves against too much real autonomy. As the careers of politicians depend on the responsiveness of the bureaucratic agencies they are responsible for, they will devise mechanisms to counter agency drift as a result of a high degree of autonomy. These mechanisms vary from legislative discretion (Huber & Shipan, 2002; Weingast & Moran, 1983), organizational design (Macey, 1992) and a number of institutional checks, monitoring devices, and sanctions (Kiewiet & McCubbins, 1991). The main point here is that the real autonomy an agency enjoys does not necessarily have to be an exact reflection of its formal bureaucratic autonomy. Under certain political, economic, or social conditions, politicians may want to prevent the agency leadership from using its formal autonomy despite the fact an agency manager is formally entitled to do so.

The discrepancy between formal and real bureaucratic autonomy can be problematic in two situations. The first situation is where an agency has

little formal autonomy but aspires for more real autonomy. This is more or less the standard or classical situation in which bureaucrats aim to break away from political oversight by forging their own issue niches, iron triangles, or advocacy coalitions. A second situation occurs, as already briefly discussed, when an agency enjoys a high level of formal bureaucratic autonomy; however, politicians attempt to cut back the formal freedoms of its agent. Such a situation can occur between politicians and independent or nonmajoritarian agencies. Here politicians may have abdicated decision-making authority to independent (regulatory) agencies because of motives based on efficiency or credible commitment (Franchino, 2002; Majone, 2001). However, when policy outcomes in areas that are administered by independent agencies incur political damage on them, and politicians believe that lessening the autonomy of the agency leadership can turn the tides, then politicians might tie the hands of agencies to prevent them from acting in a highly autonomous manner.

In conclusion, the creation of a new administrative agency is formally a process of delegating authority. This delegation involves the conceding of a formally approved degree of formal autonomy. Ideally, in a world without goal conflicts and complete information, this formally approved degree of formal autonomy may indeed become the real degree of autonomy when an agency has started executing its main tasks. However, the political world is uncertain and information is incomplete. Politicians and agencies are uncertain about which issues may become politicized and pose a threat to their positions. In reality, therefore, the real autonomy may not correspond with the formal autonomy of agencies. Depending on the issue, agencies may enjoy more (e.g., if the issue is not politicized) or less autonomy (e.g., the issue is highly politicized and under close attention of the politicians and the media) than formally is granted to them.

ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE AND REAL AUTONOMY

In the process of building a solid base for bureaucratic autonomy, the role of organizational culture is crucial (Carpenter, 2002). Whereas formal bureaucratic autonomy represents the potential capacities of an agency, its culture represents its character. An agency's culture fulfills two functions: First, it demarcates bureaucracies from one another. It differentiates the agency from other political and bureaucratic actors. Second, it strengthens the cohesion, coordination, and commitment among agency personnel. It has enabling powers as culture provides agency personnel

with a sense of belonging to a community with a shared goal and mission (Wilson, 1989).

The differentiating powers of organizational culture were observed for example by Rouban (1995) in his study of field office managers in France at the time the French government was implementing public management reforms. He found that these field office managers were keen on adopting the new managerial values to distinguish themselves from the departmental higher civil servants. Compared to their colleagues trained at the *École Nationale d'Administration* (ENA), field office managers lacked the social and cultural capital needed to become promoted to the same levels. Managerialist ideas and practices served "the enhancement of [their] professional values . . . as a reward to compensate for poor social status" (Rouban, 1995, p. 50).

Hakvoort and Veenswijk (1998) observed aspects of the enabling powers of organizational culture, too, when they were studying five Dutch cases of agency creation. Four of these five agencies were split off from a department, and one agency was created out of nothing. Although these processes involved the redesign of the organizations, they also involved a radical change in environment. Having been integrated in the ministerial and departmental hierarchy for several decades, the personnel of these agencies were placed "out in the open" away from the department of which their agency once had been a part of. They no longer could rely on the symbols and values that shaped the culture of the department but were forced to develop a distinct agency culture.

These two examples demonstrate the important functions of organizational culture for the strength of an agency's autonomy. Without it, the agency would have a weak posture within its environment and become too incoherent internally to be managed and coordinated effectively. The impact of new ideas and norms may have a far-reaching impact on bureaucratic outcomes. As one public management scholar phrased, changes in concepts used by civil servants

may simply be a "fad" or "fashion" . . . , but it might also reflect a *real change in expectations* [italics added] of the person occupying the position, pointing to differences between administration and management. . . . If changing a position description from "administrator" to "manager" changes the way the incumbent sees or carries out the position, the words used to describe it are far from trivial. . . . [A] public service based on administrative concepts will be different from one based on management. (Hughes, 1998, p. 6)

Here lies an important point. Organizational culture in combination with formal bureaucratic autonomy can create expectations among the leadership and personnel of the agency about its (future) real autonomy. The culture of central departmental bureaus is imbued with the values stressing loyalty and obedience to the minister precisely because bureaus are designed with a degree of formal autonomy that just fits the purpose of serving the minister ('t Hart & Wille, 2002; Smith, 1999). By contrast, independent agencies in the NPM era are characterized by managerialist norms precisely because their creators wanted them to perform under a high degree of formal bureaucratic autonomy (Boston, Martin, Pallot, & Walsh, 1996). In other words, the culture of an administrative organization should in an ideal situation match with its formal bureaucratic autonomy.

THE ADAPTATION PHASE AND THE PROCESS OF HABITUATION

When a new agency is created the "political world becomes a different place" (Moe, 1995, p. 143). A new bureaucratic agency becomes a vehicle for the ambitious, that is, *zealots* and *climbers* to use the Downsian terms, and a means for those who hope to improve their own positions and promote their interests through the autonomy of the agency. At the same time, its creation will profoundly affect actor constellations of the policy area in which it operates and alter the nature of the political game. Existing relations will change as the new agency is endowed with its own resources to influence the flow of events in the area. In addition, above all, change nurtures expectations among the members of the new agency, and the culture of the agency feeds these expectations. The main questions left for us to answer are the following: What does happen when the agency is formally established and left alone to perform its tasks? How does the political world become a different place? What is the nature of the interactions between the agency and the political and administrative actors in this new environment?

The game-theoretic variants of rational choice theories of delegation are potential candidates to produce an answer to these questions. Game-theoretic models of delegation represent the evolving relationship between politicians and bureaucratic agencies as subsequent rounds of decision making. The smallest set of elements is chosen to describe such a setting: only two actors (one principal and one agent) with two decision

alternatives for each (“delegate” or “not delegate” for principal and “work” or “shirk” for agent, respectively). One of the core assumptions of game theory is that each actor is rational and knows what game is being played. Moreover, politicians anticipate agency behavior in subsequent rounds of delegation. At each round or with each single decision they make, politicians try to contain agency costs, and costs caused by these uncertainties by carefully designing formal administrative structures and legislative mechanisms of control (Bendor et al., 2001).

Rational-choice game theories assume that as soon as a political principal takes the delegation decision, principal and agency internalize the new structures and make them part of their built-in calculator; know the constraints and opportunities the new institutional setting they now live in, and know the costs of each behavioral alternative related to the institutional rule or procedure in place. The point here is that game theories of delegation neglect the time period newly established political actors need to understand and interpret the rules that are in play after the delegation decision. Steeped within rational choice assumptions, these theories exclude the role that beliefs and values play as filtering devices (Goldstein & Keohane, 1993). The period following delegation will involve the sense making of these new rules and the adaptation to new roles by the agency as well as politicians (Weick, 1996). Rules, procedures, and competences may seem clear on paper as they inform all actors about the formal intentions of the designers. However, the agency leadership can interpret the rules in a different way than politicians had in mind when they designed the rules.

Scholarship on public management reform forms the second strand within the literature that may have produced answers to the questions posed above. Students of public management reform study several aspects of new public management (NPM), the major ideological movement in public administration of the late 20th century. As with every movement, NPM does have many dimensions and provides a platform of intellectual debate for academics, consultants, and practitioners alike. In contrast to the scholarship on delegation, the study of public management reform does not have any clear theoretical apparatus. Moreover, a major part of the field is devoted to the description of specific reforms in specific countries. Another branch of public management reform scholarship devotes its attention to normative issues. These include the consequences of NPM reforms on public accountability, ethics in the public sector, and a reinvigorated debate on the public-private dichotomy. Another branch of public management reforms studies are evaluative or stock-taking studies on

NPM reforms (Peters & Savoie, 1998). These studies generally focus on the changing relationship between politicians and bureaucrats (Peters & Pierre, 2001), including discussions whether and to what extent NPM reforms result in a decline in political control (T. Christensen & Lægreid, 1999), a change in administrative traditions (Campbell & Wilson, 1995), and have an impact on the structure and organization of the public sector (Hogwood, 1993; Pollitt, 2001). Finally, a considerable number of studies are explanatory studies of reform (Barzelay, 2001; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000). These studies employ institutional approaches and theories of the policy process (in particular, agenda setting and policy change theories) to explain why certain types of NPM reforms have been implemented more fundamentally in the Anglo-Saxon countries than in other, that is, western European and Scandinavian countries. In conclusion, although recently a group of scholars has embarked on a comparative study of relationships between agencies that were established as part of NPM reforms and their ministries (Pollitt et al., 2001), the questions formulated at the beginning of this section are mainly left unanswered.

To provide an answer to these questions and to fill the void left by these two main strands of literature, I use the concept of *habituation*. Berger and Luckmann (1966) were the first to describe processes of institutionalization in the social world in terms of habituation. Habituation is defined as follows: "Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort and which, *ipso facto*, is apprehended by its performer *as* that pattern" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 70-71). More important to note is that habituation is described as a phase in the process of institutionalization: It refers to the initial steps human actors take when they encounter a world or a social state of affairs that was unknown to them before. As mentioned above, this is the link that game-theoretical models of political-bureaucratic interaction are usually neglecting: Before a state of the world is taken for granted by social actors, such a state should be constructed.

The basic model of habituation is one in which two actors (*A* and *B*) from entirely different social worlds, separated from the rest of the social world, start interacting *de novo*. Their interaction will evolve in the following way (Berger & Luckmann, 1966):

As *A* and *B* interact, in whatever manner, typifications will be produced quite quickly. *A* watches *B* perform. He attributes motives to *B*'s actions and, seeing the actions recur, typifies the motives as recurrent. As *B* goes on

performing, *A* is soon able to say to himself, "Aha, there he goes again." At the same time, *A* may assume that *B* is doing the same thing with regard to him. From the beginning, both *A* and *B* assume this reciprocity of typification. In the course of their interaction these typifications will be expressed in specific patterns of conduct. That is, *A* and *B* will begin play roles *vis-à-vis* each other. (p. 74)

As similar situations recur whereby *A* and *B* keep interacting, these roles will obtain a permanent and historical character, that is, they will be played in similar future contexts and situations. In the process of interaction, actors will produce typifications of each other: defining characteristic attributes for each other's behavior so that each following interaction will become more efficient than the preceding one. Typification, hence, means the process of assigning characteristic labels by one actor regarding another.

This model's strength compared to game theoretical models is that it allows the concepts of organizational culture together with formal autonomy to be drawn into the analysis. Habituation involves a process of repeated interaction between actors that occupy different social positions and have different worldviews. Actors still act according to their self-interests; however, their self-interests are shaped by their beliefs or the norms that are embedded in the institutions under which they act. In more general terms, the concept of habituation allows us to examine rational actors from a social constructivist view (cf. Scharpf, 1997). Several remarks are in place, however. First, habituation as described by Berger and Luckmann (1966) does not include any reference to the outcome of this process. What type of interaction pattern will occur cannot be predicted. Rather, the process of habituation is basically a process of repeated interactions between individual actors. This process, second, does not take note of the interests and resources of *A* and *B*. Third, habituation following the creation of a new agency does not take place in a vacuum.² Agencies are created in an institutional order that is already in place; agencies have a certain structure that grants them formal bureaucratic autonomy; and political and administrative reformers anticipate the behavior of the agencies that will be newly established. Finally, political-administrative interaction or the process of habituation within the political realm is structured mainly along (official) publications, such as notes, (legislative) drafts, and newspapers and weekly magazine reports on one hand, and (official) meetings between bureaucrats, academics, politicians, and journalists on the other hand.

THE REVOLT OF IABS IN THE NETHERLANDS

In November 2000, five Dutch IABs (*Zelfstandige Bestuursorganen*) published a pamphlet in which they demanded that ministerial accountability should be loosened up for IABs in favor of a nonhierarchical, contractual, and horizontal arrangement of public accountability (*Handvest Publieke Verantwoording*, 2000). The publication of this *Public Accountability Charter* provoked the political principals of these agencies. The day after the pamphlet's publication (November 7, 2000), the official state organ, the *Staatscourant*, brought the news of its publication on its front page ("IABs Demand Own Domain From Minister and Parliament"). The Minister of Interior Affairs, who is the first responsible minister for the organization and structure of central government, determinedly denied any reduction of the scope of ministerial responsibility and rejected the idea that IABs could well function under a loosened form of hierarchical oversight. The primacy of politics (*primaat van de politiek*), the minister stated, should be retained for every type of public organization with delegated authority in the Netherlands.

The public debate following the publication of the pamphlet and its discussion in the *Staatscourant* was short lived; however, the quest of the leading managers of these bodies for loosening up the principle of ministerial responsibility for IABs had been lingering on for several years; as a matter of fact, it had begun at the time (late 1980s, early 1990s) the Dutch government embarked on creating more of this type of bodies, and the debate still lasts today. At the core of the debate lies the question of how much autonomy agencies that perform public tasks can possess and remain under formal political control at the same time. The IAB is an old form of administrative organization in the Netherlands. In the 1980s, it was proposed as a less radical alternative to privatization and corporatization (Vries & Yesilkagit, 1999). At the end of the century, however, this way of organizing the Dutch public sector raised a crucial debate centering on the key democratic values of political control, accountability, and bureaucratic autonomy. The following first two sections examine the role of autonomy and culture during the establishment phase of our model; the third section presents the habituation process that took place during the adaptation phase.

MINISTERIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND FORMAL BUREAUCRATIC AUTONOMY OF IABS

In the Netherlands, administrative reforms, including the creation of IABs, take place within the institutional framework of ministerial responsibility. The principle of ministerial responsibility includes the accountability of a cabinet minister toward parliament for (a) the personal behavior of ministers, (b) the behavior of the King, and (c) the behavior and decisions of the bureaucrats under ministerial authority (Bovens, 1995). In this case, we are primarily interested in the third dimension of ministerial accountability, that is, the political executive's responsibility toward parliament for the behavior of individual civil servants residing under him.

The degree of ministerial responsibility in this dimension is, in fact, a question of bureaucratic autonomy. How much formal bureaucratic autonomy do IABs have in comparison to departmental bureaus?³ In other words, how much do IABs diverge from public organizations that fall under direct ministerial responsibility in terms of their formal autonomy? I use the concept of formal bureaucratic autonomy developed by J. G. Christensen (1999) to compare the degree of formal autonomy of IABs and departmental bureaus. J. G. Christensen (1999) defined formal bureaucratic autonomy as "the formal exemption of an agency head from full political supervision by the departmental minister" (p. 9). The concept can be broken down in three dimensions: structural autonomy, financial autonomy, and legal autonomy. Formal structural autonomy is the extent or number of levels of supervision between agency head and the departmental minister. At one end of this dimension, an agency head reports directly to the minister; at the other end, the agency head reports to a board of supervisors. Formal financial autonomy is the extent to which an agency head is exempted from "one or more of the budgetary constraints constituting the principal rules of the governmental budgetary system" (J. G. Christensen, 1999, p. 9). At the low autonomy end of this dimension, an agency is entirely dependent on appropriations for its funding; at the high autonomy end, an agency may either raise funds through sales proceeds or be exempted by law from prior ministerial approval when using its budget. Finally, legal bureaucratic autonomy refers to the extent the agency head is authorized "by law . . . to make decisions in his own capacity" (J. G. Christensen, 1999, p. 9). Legal autonomy is high

when a piece of legislation authorizes the “agency to issue general regulations to fulfill policy goals defined by law” (J. G. Christensen, 1999, p. 10). Low legal autonomy means that legislation gives little discretion to an agency head to make decisions on its own (see also Huber & Shipan, 2002). We can now compare departmental bureaus and independent agencies on the basis of their formal bureaucratic autonomy (Table 1).

IAB REFORMS AND ADMINISTRATIVE CULTURE

When a departmental bureau is placed outside the departmental structure it will undergo fundamental changes in its organizational culture. Many departmental bureaus that were transformed into independent agencies underwent a transformation from a hierarchical and legalistic administrative culture toward a more managerial culture (Metcalf & Richards, 1993). As shown below, the transformation of an administrative culture into a managerial culture was an important cause of the revolt. It is a case in which a higher degree of formal bureaucratic autonomy in combination with business-like ideas has reinforced each other. The current study is able to present findings on the cultural transformation process of at least three of the five agencies that undersigned the *Public Accountability Charter* because of a study of Hakvoort and Veenswijk (1998). These authors examined the process of cultural change within five IABs in the Netherlands. Three of the five agencies they studied, that is, the Road Traffic Agency (*Rijksdienst voor het Wegverkeer*), the Land Registry Agency (*Kadaster*), and the Refugee Centre (*Centrum Opvang Asielzoekers*) also belong to the group of five agencies that undersigned the charter.⁴

Hakvoort and Veenswijk (1998) developed a 4-phased model of cultural transformation.⁵ The first phase concerns the period in which initial ideas about reorganization are presented within the organization. During this phase, the personnel of the bureau or bureaus selected for reorganization undergo a process of externalization. The designated agency leadership as well as the main actors within the department accustom themselves to the idea and start anticipating their future roles, positions, and their mutual interactions. When agencification has become a feasible option, the personnel affected by it enter a detachment phase. This group starts seeing itself already apart from the department and develops an agency protoidentity. Actual reorientation takes place when the agency has formally been split off from the department. The members of the newly established organization formulate a new mission that brings

TABLE 1
**Formal Bureaucratic Autonomy of a Departmental Bureau
 and an Independent Administrative Body**

<i>Dimension of FBA</i>	<i>Departmental Bureau</i>	<i>Independent Administrative Body</i>
Structural	The head of a bureau reports through a hierarchical chain to his superiors; the highest superior, that is, the permanent secretary, reports directly to the minister. A middle and lower ranked civil servant is appointed according to departmental rules but falls under civil service laws. Highly ranked civil servants are appointed by cabinet approval (cf. van der Meer & Rorborgh, 1993).	The head of an IAB is a member of a board of directors and is not answerable to the minister but to a board of commissioners. This board of commissioners is also not directly answerable to the minister. Civil service laws may regulate the selection process, recruitment, and career of individual staff members of an IAB; however, this is not a formal rule. IAB directors may develop their own personnel policy and hire and fire based on private employment laws.
Financial	The budget of the bureau is determined by yearly appropriations. The budgetary process is laid down in the Law on Accountability (Comptabiliteitswet). The Law on Accountability applies for all agencies that are part of the legal entity the State of the Netherlands (Staat der Nederlanden). All agencies that are part of this legal entity fall under the jurisdiction of the General Accounting Office (Kuiper, 1999).	IABs may receive funds by yearly appropriations or may raise funds based on sales proceeds. In either case, the Law on Accountability does not apply for IABs because they are created by law and thus possess a legal entity. Their legal entity may either be private or public law.
Legal	Legislation either leaves little room for issuing general rules or constitutes a framework within which agencies can further define the policy goals to achieve the overall goals of the law. The authority of the departmental bureau depends on the delegation by the minister and the minister can withdraw it whenever he deems necessary (Nicolai, Olivier, Damen, & Troostwijk, 1993, pp. 62-98; van der Pot & Donner, 1987, pp. 161-167; Wijk & Konijnenbelt, 1994, pp. 129-148).	IABs share with departmental agencies that they administer laws. IABs are created with the purpose of administering public tasks but were granted considerable degrees of formal autonomy for purposes ranging from efficiency and the technical nature of their tasks (van Thiel, 2000). However, the laws they administer may contain precise prescriptions for making decisions in individual cases (such as the assignment of scholarship and student grants, and the admission of new botanical species).

NOTE: FBA = formal bureaucratic autonomy; IABs = Independent Administrative Bodies.

together all functions, tasks, and units of the agency under the same frame of reference. The final stage of cultural transformation is when the new organization's staff and leadership are internalizing the new values and symbols of the organization (Hakvoort & Veenswijk, 1998).

The authors refer to an important point, which was also already made by Rouban (1995). Organizational reform, which involves substantial delegation of authority, is especially cherished by executive-type of agencies staffed with middle-level civil servants. Hakvoort and Veenswijk (1998) demonstrated that delegation was favored not only by politicians and the heads of the department but also by the organization itself. For many departmental agencies with executive tasks, to become independent meant an opportunity to be freed from the rigid regime of the department as well as their low-status position within the department. In particular, the agency heads were fervent proponents of a break from an administrative hierarchical culture and the adoption of managerial concepts and ideas (Hakvoort & Veenswijk, 1998). According to a Road Traffic Agency manager:

With independence, we obtained a powerful weapon to get rid of our drowsy, administrative straightjacket. We would finally start operating like a real firm; settle the score with the yoke of administrative procedures, rules, in fact the whole yoke of the department that we have carried with us for so long. Everyone was convinced that the RDW has the potential to bring a beautiful set of products on the market. . . . The feeling that we were taking command was wide-spread. (Hakvoort & Veenswijk, 1998, p. 68)

Parallel to Rouban's (1995) analysis, Hakvoort and Veenswijk's (1998) study shows that the Road Traffic Agency attracted people with highly professional skills but without a high social culture. The majority of the organizational members, at the time this agency was part of the department, were technically skilled persons with a background in car mechanics (Hakvoort & Veenswijk, 1998, p. 62). The Land Registry Agency happened to be a departmental bureau with a strictly executive task and functioned within a strict hierarchy. The agency was a similar type of organization: Field engineers formed the main group of professionals within the agency. When it became an IAB, the agency transformed itself from a rigid bureaucratic organization into a high technology organization built around highly advanced information and communication technology systems.

THE HABITUATION PROCESS BETWEEN CABINET AND IABS 1994-2000

This final empirical section examines the process of habituation that took place during the adaptation phase, which is the second phase in our model. The creation of IABs in the Netherlands had been part of a broad long-term decentralization program that was launched in the early 1980s. It is important to note the program was implemented without ideological debates and did enjoy the warm support by center-right as well as center-left cabinets. There existed a political consensus that IABs should operate independently, make extensive use of private sector management techniques and ideas (de Vries & Yesilkagit, 1999). In 1994 and 1995, however, political consensus toward the creation of IABs suddenly broke down. This breakdown took place after the publication of a very critical report of the General Accounting Office (GAO, 1995).⁶ With regard to the control and responsiveness of IABs, the report concluded that 81 IABs (of a total of 545) had been established without any specific motivation; 17 did not have a legal basis for performing their public tasks; 45 agencies did not have a legal basis on which their financial management was based; 31 agencies did not have the legal obligation to inform their minister; and, in the case of 59 agencies, the minister had no means to intervene in the agency's management and administration. Between 1994 and 2000, following the publication of the GAO report, subsequent cabinets took measures to limit the autonomy of IABs. The primacy of politics thesis was born as the cabinet issued its "Improvement of the Primacy of Politics While Steering Independent Administrative Agencies"⁷ (*Tweede Kamer*, 1994-1995, 24130, nr. 5).

According to this position paper, three steering problems concerning IABs had to be tackled. First, there were too few instruments and means for the minister to effectively influence agency behavior. Second, in cases where there were sufficient means, the danger existed that independent executive agencies obtained a too-strong position within the policy-making process. This problem was particularly acute with agencies whose governance structure accommodated for representatives of social interest groups. Finally, even if they possessed the means to do so, ministers did not always use their authority in a consistent and predictable manner, so that agency heads often complained about inconsistencies in their dealings with the minister and the department.

The position paper described four measures to "restore the primacy of politics" (*Tweede Kamer*, 1994-1995, 21130, nr. 5: 7-9). First, it required that in future institutional designs of IABs, political control should form

the main principle of design. If the task at hand had an explicit public nature, then that task should not be delegated to an IAB. Especially, the creation of IABs to accommodate for interest groups should be critically discussed. Second, the paper mentioned that current and future IABs should operate under a single legal-administrative framework. The framework should specify the conditions under which a new agency could be created as well as stipulate the basic ingredients of a founding act. As a matter of fact, such a framework appeared in September 1996, that is, "Designations Concerning Independent Agencies"⁸ (*Staatscourant*, 1996, nr. 177). Third, as a follow-up to the 1995 GAO report, the cabinet initiated a new assessment of the IABs. This was published in the "Assessment Report of Independent Administrative Agencies"⁹ (*Tweede Kamer*, 1996-1997, 25268, nr. 1). Finally, the cabinet promised to evaluate the instruments available to departments to control and steer IABs.

As a next step, the cabinet drafted a framework law for IABs, the *Kaderwet Zelfstandige Bestuursorganen* (*Tweede Kamer*, 2000-2001, 27426, nr. 3). The draft contained proposals to curb the structural autonomy of IABs. The cabinet proposed that the appointment and dismissal of agency directors, as well as their pay and salaries, should belong to the discretion of a minister. Furthermore, the draft of the Framework Act stipulated that IAB personnel would remain civil servants and that private sector personnel regimes would not be allowed. All personnel working for an IAB should, in other words, remain public servants. The framework would allow exceptions, of course, however these had to be considered first separately by the minister.

The *Public Accountability Charter* was an outright protest of these measures. The primacy of politics thesis went directly against the expectations of a small group of IABs. The cultural transformation these IABs had gone through as well as the high degree of formal autonomy that had been delegated to them did not match with the thesis of the cabinet. In November 2000, then, the Road Traffic Agency, the Information Management Agency, the Land Registry Agency, the Refugee Centre, and the Forest Agency jointly published the *Public Accountability Charter*. The *Charter* was a direct reaction against the draft Framework Act, which these agencies considered the final drop in a row of several political-ideological attempts from cabinet and parliament to take back a substantial amount of their formal autonomy (F. Tierolff, personal communication, March, 27, 2001).

The text of the *Charter* had been discussed several times long before the draft of the Framework Act was presented to parliament. The first draft

of the piece was actually presented during a meeting of the so-called Waaier group, sometime at the end of 1999 and the beginning of 2000. The Waaier group was a loose network of directors and leading managers of semipublic and private organizations. Its nucleus consisted of the personal network of a former director of the Information Management Agency (Mr. Bruins Slot). The paper was presented at one meeting of the group. The piece contained a list of ideas about agency management and the issue of responsibility. The paper was written by Bruins Slot himself, and it was meant as a step up for a discussion among the group members. The members present at that meeting welcomed the piece with great enthusiasm. Coincidentally, these participants were the directors and some staff members of Road Traffic Agency, the Information Management Agency, the Land Registry Agency, and the Forest Agency. They took up the paper and worked on it several times until it became published as the *Public Accountability Charter*.¹⁰

The charter contains the following thesis. The state has lost its legitimacy because of certain fundamental societal changes. Citizens have become emancipated and are no longer dependent on the state for their primary needs. Considering the decline of the state as a threat to their position, politicians claim to restore the primacy of politics. Their efforts are in vain, the charter asserts, because the making and implementation of policy has become a concern of a multitude of actors at different levels of the state and society. The state, hence, is no longer the central actor that can steer society top down. In their terms: "The state has become a team player in an environment that is characterized by growing complexity, continuous change, less predictability, less hierarchy but more horizontal relationships" (*Handvest Publieke Verantwoording*, 2000, n.p.)

Finally, democratic accountability should be considered a goal not an instrument by itself:

Namely, a chain of public accountability that encompasses bodies and organizations that operates within the public domain. A chain [as this] considers each actor as a full and equal player within the public realm and takes coordination instead of super- or subordination as its starting point. The state does not retreat [from the public realm] but creates room. She plays her role in the whole [play] and directs [sic]; she defines norms and acts as a referee [sic]. (*Handvest Publieke Verantwoording*, 2000, n.p.)

The heads of these agencies claimed, therefore, that the principle of ministerial responsibility should be reconsidered and revised so as to fit within the newly emerged order. The choice for politicians is now between to

hold tight to the idea of hierarchical relationships and a hierarchical organization of responsibility or to acknowledge horizontalization as a fundamental trend and take it as a guiding principle.

DISCUSSION

The final part of this article applied the model that was developed in the first part to a specific event that occurred during a recent period of administrative reforms in the Netherlands. During the 1980s, there had existed a solid consensus among the members of subsequent coalition cabinets to privatize and, if not possible, to establish independent agencies to execute policy tasks. Reform policies resulted in a large number of so-called *zelfstandige bestuursorganen* (IABs) enjoying a high degree of formal bureaucratic autonomy and managerialist cultures. However, the political consensus broke down, and political preferences changed from high autonomy to low autonomy for independent agencies and subsequent cabinets made the primacy of politics the guiding principle of their administrative reform programs. Despite the fact that many IABs did have high degrees of formal bureaucratic autonomy and had transformed their bureaucratic cultures into more managerial ones, Dutch politicians initiated steps during a period of several years to curb the autonomy of IABs. The result was that a number of the highly autonomous and managerial IABs undersigned a pamphlet to protest the primacy of politics doctrine of the cabinet.

The application of this model to our case allows for making the following observations. First, formal bureaucratic autonomy is a multidimensional as much as it is a contingent variable. Formal structural, financial, and legal autonomy are contingent on the main norms of political accountability that prevail in a political system at a certain point in time. In the Netherlands, the principle of ministerial accountability is a constitutional rule that governs the organization and functioning of the Dutch administrative apparatus since the second half of the 19th century. Many scholars in the Netherlands agree that IABs are an old form of governance in the Netherlands that historically even precedes the institutionalization of the ministerial accountability. However, the case showed that there apparently exists a limit on what type of bodies are admissible in a political system at a certain time of its development, regardless of the fact that that specific organizational form is part of that polity's political and administrative traditions.

Second, organizational culture strongly affects not only the functioning of an organization but also its interactions with its environment. In an earlier study, I examined how the uptake of managerial values led to the formalization of high levels of discretion to floor-level civil servants—with some disastrous consequences (Yesilkagit & de Vries, 2002). In the Netherlands, administrative reforms were conducted under the escort of managerial ideas (de Vries & Yesilkagit, 1999). In the case of the Dutch government's IAB policies, it has led to a greater demand of real autonomy by the heads of these agencies. Finally, habituation starts when a new agency is created and ends when there establishes a new equilibrium between politicians and the agency. Ideally, this equilibrium should reflect the expectations of each of the actors involved in the habituation process. Before the publication of the critical report of the General Accounting Office, politicians and (future) agency executives expected that the new state of the world would be one of a market-like partnership between political executives and independent agencies. However, the framework of the GAO finds its anchor place in Dutch administrative law, as it controls the legality and effectiveness of public spending in the Netherlands. Although the GAO is a constitutional organ (Article 76) and incumbent governments cannot just deny its investigations, the organ is usually depoliticized in cases where it publishes a critical report. The fact that the incumbent government did not depoliticize the IAB report may partly be explained by the fact that the constitutional order, in which the principle of ministerial responsibility is anchored, may be much more adhered to by Dutch politicians than the rhetoric of managerial reform of the 1980s did suggest.¹¹

CONCLUSION

This article developed and illustrated a model of political-bureaucratic adaptation between independent agencies and their political principals. In particular, following a main proposition expounded in the literature that the creation of a new bureaucratic organization substantially affects the political world, this model focused on how and what type of relationships between newly created agencies and their ministers may emerge. The basic assumption underlying this model was that when a new agency is created its leadership and the political actors with whom the leadership is to interact in the near future need a time period to adapt to new positions and roles. This assumption was derived from the sociological work on

habituation and is considered as an important adjustment to rational choice theories of delegation that, in general, deny belief systems and values to play a role in politics.

The model is built on the concepts of bureaucratic autonomy, administrative culture, and habituation and consists of two phases and involves three independent processes. The first phase is the establishment phase and includes two processes: delegation of formal bureaucratic autonomy and a process of cultural transformation. The second phase concerns an adaptation phase in which the newly created agency starts interactions with other actors in its environment: a process of habituation. The model states that depending on the degree of formal bureaucratic autonomy delegated to an agency and the kind of organizational culture that evolves within the agency a specific type of relationship between the agency and its environment—here: with its political principal—will emerge through a process of habituation. What kind of relationship eventually will result depends on the preferences of politicians (high or less autonomy for the agency) and the expectation of the agency about the role it will play in policy processes in its domain.

This model has its caveats, of course. The most important caveat is perhaps that it is formulated in a highly inductive way and that it is based on only one case.¹² This implies that the model, as it is presented here, is by no means thoroughly tested. Moreover, the proposed causal chain may even turn out to be unique for this case. It would perhaps have been better to first explore the relationships between autonomy, administrative culture, and habituation more in a general framework. Despite these caveats, I did apply this model here because the case of the agency revolt was a critical case that revealed the important roles played by autonomy (real vs. formal) and organizational culture. It also demonstrates that it is fruitful to study processes of political-bureaucratic adaptation in terms of habituation, that is, a process in which a new political-bureaucratic order is created after formal rules and structures have been designed during the process of delegation.

NOTES

1. The concept of formal bureaucratic autonomy as it is used here is built upon the work of J. G. Christensen (1999). It is discussed more elaborately in one of the following sections of this article.

2. Berger and Luckmann (1966), however, illustrate habituation as it takes place between two individuals meeting each other for the first time in substantially different contexts than they were raised in.

3. Independent Administrative Bodies (IABs) differ considerably from each other in terms of their formal bureaucratic autonomy. Here, when describing IABs' formal bureaucratic autonomy we take a public law-based IAB as our main point of reference.

4. The other two agencies are museums.

5. These phases are adapted from Berger and Luckmann (1966): externalization, objectivation, and internalization (Hakvoort & Veenswijk 1998, p. 42).

6. This evaluation of IABs by the General Accounting Office (GAO) had been agreed on and scheduled after the cabinet note *Kabinetstandpunt Functionele Decentralisatie* (1990) in which the second Lubbers cabinet (1986-1990) had explicated its future IAB policies.

7. In Dutch: Herstel van het primaat van de politiek bij de aansturing van zelfstandige bestuursorganen.

8. In Dutch: Aanwijzingen inzake zelfstandige bestuursorganen.

9. In Dutch: Rapportage Doorlichting Zelfstandige Bestuursorganen.

10. See www.kadaster.nl/profiel/index.html, consulted on March 24, 2003.

11. It must also be noted that the report appeared during a center-left cabinet. The Social Democrats certainly welcomed a formal report that was critical against public sector reform. Whatever the motives of the actions of the cabinet were, which is difficult to examine, the principle of legality did set aside the rhetoric of reform.

12. See King, Keohane, & Verba (1994, p. 50) on restrictiveness of models.

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