

## **Civil Service Policy-Making Competency: Reflections from a British-German Study**

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### **Background**

The following seven observations are largely based on a comparative study of civil service competency<sup>1</sup> in policy-making in the UK Department of Trade and Industry and the (then) Federal Economics ministry in Germany.<sup>2</sup> The report of the study is available from the website of LSE's ESRC Centre for Analysis of Risk and Regulation.<sup>3</sup>

### **POLICY-MAKING COMPETENCY: SEVEN OBSERVATIONS**

#### **Competency is not just delivery**

1. Over the past twenty years at least, discussion of civil service competency in the UK has focused overwhelmingly on issues of 'service delivery' and the management qualities (or deficits) associated with delivering effective public services to citizens. Such matters, as well as the process management skills emphasised in the recently announced 'Professional Skills for Government' initiative for departmental management (October 2004), are undeniably and perennially important. But they should not overshadow the issue of civil service competency in policy-making, and indeed numerous well-informed observers (such as Donald Savoie in Canada) have pointed to the dangers of trying to fix service delivery competency without paying at least equivalent attention to policy making competency. Indeed, Savoie goes so far as

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<sup>1</sup>. Competency is an idea that has several different strains, and ideas about the skills and competencies required of public servants engaged in policy-making have varied both over time, among countries and even among different parts of the public service in the UK. Examples of such variation include the differing relative emphasis placed on subject expertise, on areas of knowledge or skill crucial to the strategic position of an organization and, most prominently in the past two decades, to individual behaviours. See C. Hood and M. Lodge (2004) 'Competency, Bureaucracy, and Public Management Reform' *Governance*, 17 (3): 313-33 and M. Lodge and C. Hood (2003) 'Competency and Bureaucracy: Diffusion, Application and Appropriate Response?' *West European Politics*, 26(3): 131-52.

<sup>2</sup> The study, sponsored by the Smith Institute and the Industry Forum in 2001-2, involved tracing the autobiography of six policy documents (varying in the degree of 'problem complexity' involved) in those two organizations, identifying the skills and knowledge contributed by the various civil servants involved in producing those documents, and comparing the qualities revealed in that analysis with the official civil service competency frameworks applying to the two departments in the study.

<sup>3</sup>. Available at:

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CARR/documents/civilServicePolicyMakingCompetencies.htm>.

to claim that it is the latter that (contrary to stereotype) is the more problematic competency for high civil services.<sup>4</sup>

### **Three limitations of official competency frameworks**

2. Until recently, at least, official competency frameworks applying to civil servants engaged in policy-making in both the UK<sup>5</sup> and Germany have been limited in at least three other ways as well.

- (a) ‘Over-individualized’. They have tended to focus almost exclusively on the skills and behaviours of individuals, rather than on the team or group capacities that the ‘core competencies’ literature in strategic management have identified as crucial to achieving ‘best in world’ organizational effectiveness (and on which both outside and inside critics tend to focus in diagnosing the most serious failings of the civil service policy machine, as often containing a mix of brilliant people and terrible organization).
- (b) ‘Evidence lite’. In spite of professed commitment to ‘evidence based policy-making’ in both countries, competency frameworks have been produced on the basis of the views of self-referential civil service focus groups rather than on systematic research documenting what behaviours and skills civil servants actually bring to the process (or processes) of policy making and how they are perceived by outside parties. It is as if Frederick Winslow Taylor (the father of modern management theory) had set about organizing work processes and compensation on the basis of a self-selected workers’ focus group rather than by actually observing work processes on the factory floor.
- (c) ‘Process heavy’. Official competency frameworks also have something of a ‘Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark’ quality. By that we mean that they are not based on well-developed criteria for judging how good the ‘policy crafting’ of civil servants is in a substantive sense. (Though there are procedurally-oriented check-lists of a rather elementary kind, that invite shallow box-ticking responses and typically give no guidance as to how to handle tradeoffs among different desiderata or how to handle so-called ‘wicked issues’.) While it is undoubtedly difficult to judge the quality of civil service contributions to policy, given the confidentiality and political sensitivity of much of that work, such issues arise in judging quality of work in almost every profession. Moreover, many of those who we interviewed in our study showed the ability to judge policy substance against the political constraints policy-making civil servants were working under, suggesting that peer-evaluations are far from impossible. The challenge for any central framework for individual and organisational competencies is to collect and develop those judgements into explicit competency criteria for civil service

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<sup>4</sup> D. J. Savoie (1994) *Thatcher, Reagan, Mulroney: in search of a new bureaucracy*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press.

<sup>5</sup> Available at:

[http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/management\\_information/senior\\_civil\\_service/ses\\_performance\\_and\\_reward/publications/pdf/competence\\_framework\\_a3.pdf](http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/management_information/senior_civil_service/ses_performance_and_reward/publications/pdf/competence_framework_a3.pdf).

policy-making – something that would have to be done from inside, and not take the form of a hand-me-down business competency framework.

### **A New Age Presents New Challenges for Policy Competency**

3. Yet, despite the beguiling mantra of ‘delivery’, policy-making competency in national civil service systems is perhaps more important than ever in current conditions. The contemporary age presents sharp new challenges for civil servants’ policy competency for at least three related reasons

(a) The subject-expertise needed for effective and well-informed policy-making is decreasingly likely to be available within the central parts of the public bureaucracy as in-house expertise is squeezed, outsourced or simply unavailable. So civil servants increasingly need the sort of competency that involves successfully identifying, assessing and relating to the sources of that expertise, wherever it may be found;

(b) Even outside the boundaries of government organization, in an age of globalized science and technical expertise, there is no longer any guarantee that established sources of national expertise, even in developed countries such as the UK or Germany, are ‘best in world’ for all purposes. So civil servants increasingly need the sort of competency that enables them to operate successfully in an international rather than a purely national arena of expertise;

(c) The internationalisation of markets make many of the ways that governments traditionally consulted and gathered information about policy increasingly problematic in the selection of appropriate stakeholders and consultees. So civil servants increasingly need new sorts of competency in consulting and gathering information that fit those altered circumstances.

### **Consultation and the Central Policy Competency**

4. Indeed, the skills and knowledge needed for effective consultation are central to civil servants’ policy-making competencies, yet those consultation skills have tended to be largely ignored in official competency documents over the past decade. That is partly because (as noted earlier) those documents have had an overwhelming ‘delivery management’ bias and also because the frameworks have tended to stress analogies with private-sector management, for which there is no real counterpart to the process of policy consultation in and by government. It is true that consultation has become part of the Regulatory Impact Assessment exercise in the UK and a number of official UK documents now exist with recommendations about good consultation. Nevertheless, it is curious that consultation is not given a central place in official competency frameworks.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Outward-Facing Policy Competencies Modern Governments Need**

5. Specifically, effective policy-making by civil servants in modern government requires skills in outward-facing consultation in at least three ways

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/regulation/consultation-guidance/>. Similarly, consultation is part of the codified standard operating procedures of federal ministries and of the federal government.

(a) consultation within an increasingly complex and multi-layered structure of government, inside and across central departments and other parts and levels of the state;

(b) consultation outside government with groups affected by policy, including business groups and the public at large, in a world of internationalised markets and changing technological possibilities for conducting consultation;

(c) consultation within and outside government with experts and scientists – something that has been much discussed in the aftermath of policy failures in food and agriculture policy, but much less so in economic or industrial policy.

However, in neither the UK DTI nor the (then) German BMWi did official central competency frameworks lay heavy stress on such skills. In neither case did those frameworks encompass all three of these key dimensions of consultation. And in both cases interviewees tended to be complacent about the challenge of ensuring that the input of expert and scientific expertise into policy was ‘best in world’.

### **Boundary-Spanning Competencies<sup>7</sup>**

6. Policy-making occurs in many different political climates, modes and circumstances. But where it amounts to anything more than political signalling, presentation or judicious ‘parking’ of difficult problems, a crucial skill for civil servants is to make effective links between standard-setting, information-gathering and behaviour-modification or implementation. That link – or the absence of it – is central to the problem of policy effectiveness in modern government. In current conditions, where policy standards are often set at the EU level or by other international bodies and where information-gathering and implementation tend to be the responsibility of special-purpose bodies or local and regional government, a key challenge for civil servants in policy-making is to develop the skills and disposition to link together effective ground-level implementation experience with influence over standard-setting.

### **How to Develop Boundary-Spanning Competencies**

7. Developing this crucial competency requires:

(a) The ability and opportunity to switch between policy-making roles and ‘front line delivery’ work. Such switching was traditionally hampered by both the structure and culture of executive government in both the UK and Germany and remains so in Germany.<sup>8</sup> But our study the UK department brought front-line experience to bear on policy-making by incorporating individuals with that experience into policy teams in a way that did not happen in the German case, and indeed the UK government departments are increasingly bringing front-line expertise to bear on their ‘delivery’ policies, in a development that needs to be sustained and encouraged.

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<sup>7</sup> For the concept of boundary spanning, see P. Williams (2002) ‘The Competent Boundary Spanner’ *Public Administration* 80: 103-24. See also P.Ingraham (2001) *Linking Leadership to Performance in Public Organisations*, PUMA/HRM (2001)8/Final, June 2001.

<sup>8</sup> . However, in the German case, the fact that the Länder are entrenched in large areas of policy-setting and responsible for implementation of most federal policy, meant that a implementation perspective was embedded in the policy-making process in a way that does not happen even in post-devolution UK.

(b) The ability and opportunity to switch between government and business experience via secondments of civil servants to business and from business into the civil service. Numerous initiatives of this kind have been mounted in the UK over the past twenty years, and we found more instances of it among the policy-making civil servants in our UK case than in the German one, where legal provisions largely precluded such interchanges. But it must be asked how such interchanges can be organized so as to develop the policy-making competencies of the secondees.

(c) The ability and opportunity to work in different national civil service settings. Traditionally confined to the foreign service (and even there typically within the 'bubble' of the national corps), this requirement runs up against both formal and informal barriers to movement of this kind. In our study, most of the policy-making civil servants who had gained international experience in both countries had done so by working for international organizations, or working for the UK in Brussels. But it must be asked whether a far more international pattern of recruitment to policy-making positions in the civil service is needed to develop such competencies.

### **Overall**

The Civil Service competency frameworks that first appeared in their modern form about a decade ago have tended to emphasize delivery and 'corporate-man' (or '-woman') attributes. Policy-making competencies should not be squeezed out by this approach and the challenge now is to develop a new generation of competency frameworks that put policy competencies at centre stage.

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