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## RECOVERING THE 'CRAFT' OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN WESTMINSTER GOVERNMENT\*

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## Introduction

For the past 40 years, there has been an obsessive concern with reforming the public sector. We have seen a shift from the New Public Management (NPM) to the New Public Governance (NPG). Reform succeeded reform with no time for the intended changes to take effect, no evaluation. There was no clear evidence of either success or failure. Rather, we are left with the dilemmas created by the overlapping residues of past reforms. So, we need to take stock of where we have come from. We need to look back to look forward. We need to ask, 'what is the role of the public servant in the era of NPM and NPG? In particular, we need to recognise that the old craft skills of traditional public administration remain of paramount importance.

The first section describes the main characteristics of traditional public administration, NPM and NPG. Section 2 defines 'craft'. Section 3 discusses the craft skills of counselling, stewardship, practical wisdom, probity, judgement, diplomacy, and political nous. The article concludes the craft skills remain of paramount importance. It is not a question of traditional skills versus the new skills of new public management or network governance. It is a question of what works; of what skills fit in a particular context. The pendulum has swung too far for too long towards the new and the fashionable. It needs to swing back towards bureaucracy and the traditional skills of bureaucrats as part of the repertoire of governing.

This article discusses the continuing relevance of the craft skills of traditional public administration in Westminster governments. This term refers to Britain and the old dominion countries of the British Commonwealth such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Rhodes  
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et al (2009: 10) see Westminster as a family of ideas including: responsible cabinet government, ministerial responsibility to parliament, a professional non-partisan public service, and the unity of the executive and legislature. For this article, the central idea is that of a professional, non-partisan public service.

For clarity's sake, because the terminology varies between countries, the labelling of politicians and public servants has been standardised throughout the article. In Britain, the top official is called the permanent secretary, in Australia the departmental secretary, and in Canada the deputy minister. For convenience and simplicity, the short form of secretary is used throughout. Similarly, the term for the politician at the head of the department or agency varies. The term minister is used throughout. However, *both* ministers and civil servants are mutual dependent with overlapping roles and responsibilities; each role one side of the same coin. So, following Hecló and Wildavsky (1974: 2 and 36), they are also referred to as 'political administrators' to stress their interdependence.

The term generalist is commonly employed in Westminster countries to describe the craft of the public administrator but the idea is not specific to them. Thus, Hecló (1977: 2-3) talks about the 'craft knowledge' of the high-ranking Washington bureaucrats: about 'understanding acquired by learning on the job', not through specialist training. In a similar vein, Stillman (2011) discusses the role of *Public Administration Review* in forging a generalist public administration. He argues that 'sustaining generalist public professionalism in the era of narrowly specialized, hyperfragmented, competitive expertise' is of critical importance and experience is the bedrock of that professionalism (Stillman 2011: 912-3).

This notion of the generalist administrator lies at the heart of the traditional craft in the USA as well as Westminster governments.

## From traditional public administration to the new public governance

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

Table 1: PA, NPM and NPG Compared

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

Source: Compiled from Osborne 2010; and Rhodes 1998

### Traditional public administration

We have turned our backs on traditional public administration; it is seen as the problem not the solution. Politicians, political staffers and even some public servants hold many important misconceptions about the past of our public services. Traditional public administration refers

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to classic bureaucrats working in a hierarchy of authority and conserving the state tradition. In Table 1, their task is to provide policy advice for their political masters and oversee the implementation of the politician's decision.

According to a former Head of the British Home Civil Service, Sir Edward Bridges (1950: 50, 51, 52 and 55-57), the generalist has four 'skills or qualities'. First, they must have 'long experience of a particular field'. Second, there are the specialised skills or arts of the administrator; of knowing 'how and where to go to find reliable knowledge', assessing 'the expertise of others at its true worth', spotting 'the strong and weak points in any situation at short notice, and advising 'on how to handle a complex situation'. Third, the civil servant should 'study difficult subjects intensively and objectively, with the same disinterested desire to find the truth at all costs'. Finally, the civil servant must 'combine the capacity for taking a somewhat coldly judicial attitude with the warmer qualities essential to managing large numbers of staff' (Bridges 1950: 50, 51, 52 and 55-57; see also Wilson 2003). Or, turning to more recent times, Simon James (1992: 26), a former civil servant, summarises the required skills as 'the capacity to absorb detail at speed, to analyse the unfamiliar problem at short notice, to clarify and summarise it, to present options and consequences lucidly, and to tender sound advice in precise and clear papers'. And these qualities are not confined to Westminster governments. Thus, Goodsell (1992: 247) also sees public administration as 'the execution of an applied or practical art'. Traditional public administration continues to be characterised as an art and a craft as much as it is a science, and public servants are generalists; that is, a profession based on craft knowledge.

### The new public management

The last 40 years have seen three waves of NPM reforms. In Table 1, the first wave of NPM was managerialism or hands-on, professional management; explicit standards and measures of performance; managing by results; and value for money. That was only the beginning. In the second wave, governments embraced marketization or neo-liberal beliefs about competition and markets. It introduced ideas about restructuring the incentive structures of public service provision through contracting-out, and quasi-markets. The third wave of NPM focuses on service delivery. Nothing has gone away. We have geological strata of reforms that comprise a 'civil service reform syndrome' in which 'initiatives come and go, overlap and ignore each other, leaving behind residues of varying size and style' (Hood and Lodge 2007: 59). The inoculation theory of reform does not work - you are not immune after one bout. Although the extent of the reforms varies from country to country, and the Westminster countries were among the most enthusiastic, public service reform is ubiquitous. It is comprehensively mapped in Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011: 9) who conclude 'it has become a key element in many ... countries. It has internationalised. ... In short, it has arrived.'

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

*Integrated Leadership System.* (1) In both countries, leadership is often invoked and it refers to managing government departments.

The nearer reform gets to the political sphere, the vaguer the discussion. Thus, better policy making boils down to a call for greater contestability in policy advice and, under the label 'what works', it seeks more evidence-based policy making (*Civil Service Reform Plan 2012: chapter 2*). It does not discuss the respective roles of secretaries and ministers. When the Report touches on the tasks of political-administrators, it can strike a politically naive tone. Thus, on implementation, it suggests, for example, ministers, who will be in office for two years or less, will delay a policy announcement while it is thought through and civil servants are retrained (2012: 18). The comment 'seems implausible' springs to one's lips unbidden. It is all too easy to hear the impatience in the minister's voice. Indeed, it is a moot point whether NPM has had much effect on the behaviour of ministers. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011: 180-81) conclude 'there is an absence of convincing evidence', so the case is 'unproven'.

### The new public governance (NPG)

In Table 1, managing networks is at the heart of NPG. For example, both the Dutch school (Kickert 1997) and the Anglo-governance school (Rhodes 1997a) posit a shift from hands-on to hands-off steering by the state. Hands-off steering refers to working with and through networks or webs of organizations that achieve shared policy objectives through continuously negotiated beliefs and the exchange of resources within agreed rules of the game (see also: Torfing et al. 2012: 14; see also Koliba et al. 2011: 60).

The first point to note is that whereas NPM inspired a vast array of management reforms, NPG inspired few equivalent changes, although Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011: 212) see joining-up in its various forms as one of the themes of reform that has 'grown in prominence internationally since the turn of the century' (see for example: Cm 4310 1999; Management Advisory Committee (MAC) 2004).

What does NPG say about the role of the public service? What are the new skills? Torfing et al (2012: 156-9; and chapter 7) suggest that the traditional role of the public service is 'supplemented' (not replaced) with that of 'meta-governor managing and facilitating interactive governance'. Their task is to 'balance autonomy of networks with hands-on intervention'. They have various specific ways of carrying out this balancing act. They can 'campaign for a policy, deploy policy narratives, act as boundary spanners, and form alliance with politicians'. They become 'meta-governors' managing the mix of bureaucracy, markets and networks (see also: Koliba et al 2011: xxxii and chapter 8).

So, the neutral, competent servants of the political executive must now master the skills for managing the complex, non-routine issues, policies and relationships in networks; that is, meta-governing, boundary spanning, and collaborative leadership. The task is to manage the mix of bureaucracy, markets and networks (Rhodes 1997b). The public service needs new skills but it is a step too far to talk of these new skills requiring 'a full blown cultural transformation' (Goldsmith and Eggers 2004: 178). Indeed, part of the problem is this call for transformative cultural change. As Sir Arthur Tange 1982: 2), former secretary of the Australian Department of Defence, commented, the reformers had 'demolished or at least fractured the symmetry of the Westminster model' but had not replaced it with 'a coherent structure of ideas to be a guiding light for loyalties and behavioural proprieties in the Federal

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Public Service'. His sentiment remains relevant. There is still much to value in the traditional craft of public administration.

## **Recovering the craft**

Why has public service reform such a chequered history? In part, it is a failure of political will. Politicians make bold statements but often are unsure about what changes they want. When they do propose change, they move on to other policy concerns all too quickly. They talk the talk but do not walk the walk. Also, as Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011: 169-70) point out, politicians are reluctant to stick with the roles allocated to them by the reforms. It is all well and good decentralising authority to bureaucrats but, when something goes wrong, ministers can resist neither the temptation, nor sometimes the political imperative, to interfere. Public service reform is also a symbolic policy. Everybody loves bashing the bureaucracy. It has the appearance of decisive action. But effective organizational change is a long slog and the next election is always looming. If you imagine yourself in a minister's or a secretary's shoes, performance management does not matter much. Useful, but not where the real action is. As Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011: 174) conclude, any reform that 'assigns a new role to politicians is at risk of being embarrassed by their lack of cooperation'.

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

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the minister's career. There is a failure to recognise the continued relevance of the old, craft skills.

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

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

Maude claimed this statement was 'without constitutional propriety' and the civil service should focus on 'the priorities of the government of the day'. According to the BBC, the document 'enraged cabinet ministers' because it contained the statement that the secretary 'tolerates high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty and rapid change – and at times irrational political demands'. Lord Butler of Brockwell, former Head of the Home Civil Service, considered the document accurate and observed that 'There is nothing there that I wouldn't have put down in black and white'. (2) What is clear is that there is no agreement on either the stewardship role of the civil service or on the appropriate relationship between ministers and civil servants. Revisiting the old arts would seem timely. (3)

## **The Craft Skills**

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

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* a craft is a skill, an occupation or profession requiring special skill or knowledge. That is only the beginning when seeking to understand the term. To call something a craft rather than a science is to accept the importance of experiential knowledge as well as formal knowledge. The craft is learned on the job. A craft involves passing on practical knowledge from generation to generation. There is a 'master' and the novice moves from apprentice to journeyman to master. Commonly, there is a profession - or historically, a guild – and it controls membership and regulates knowledge and practices. Much of that knowledge is tacit. It has not been systematised. It is complex. Often it is secret. In this way, the practitioners of the craft can control the supply and demand for their skills.

In seeking to identify the 'traditional' skills, there is no defining text, no definitive survey, of these skills, which depend on both individual talents and the context in which they are exercised. Indeed, existing lists of skills are about what skills the public servant *ought* to have in the era of NPM, not descriptions of the skills public servants deploy in their everyday lives. So, the analysis is based on the existing literature, especially on the reflections of practitioners and research reports based on interviews with practitioners. (4) Whenever

possible, the analysis is illustrated with the words of the political-administrators at the head of departments of state.

### Counselling

The traditional public servant has been described as the 'Mandarin' and their skill lies not 'in administering policy but in making it, not least because of a seemingly unchallengeable "professional" experience and judgment as instituted, independent "counsel of government"' (du Gay 2009: 360). Their allegiance is to the state rather than exclusively to the governing party and they provide a check on the partisan actions of ministers. Their characteristics include:

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

Political-administrators also act as a counterweight to partisan interests and arguments. Here lies a dilemma. In suggesting to a minister there are problems with the policy, counsellors court the danger of appearing to usurp power. They could be seen as putting their conception of the state before that of the minister; they take it upon themselves to determine the public interest. For some commentators that is the role of the public servant. James Fesler (1990: 91)

argues that the public interest is for administrators what objectivity is for scholars ... If there is not a public interest then we must denounce the idea of ideals - if it is illusory, so are justice, liberty and integrity'. So, the political-administrator is guardian of the public interest; they act as Platonic guardians.

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

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

### Stewardship

Bureaucrats are not leaders. The task of senior bureaucrats is to apply top-down authority; they are cogs in the machine. But with NPM came the idea of entrepreneurial leadership; of public servants who sought out ways to improve the performance of their organization and sold these ideas to their various stakeholders. Thus, Doig and Hargrove (1987) seek to reclaim the bureaucrat as leader by identifying twelve individuals in high-level executive positions in American federal, state and local government who were entrepreneurial or transformative leaders because they had innovative ideas, and put them into practice.

Terry (1995) is critical of these borrowing from the private sector leadership literature. He sees the heroic or transformative model of leadership with the 'great man' radically changing the organization and disdaining its existing traditions as a threat to 'institutional integrity'. An institution has integrity when 'it is faithful to the functions, values, and distinctive set of unifying principles that define its special competence and character' (Terry 1995: 44). The task of administrative leaders is to preserve this institutional integrity; that is, to conserve the institution's mission, values, and support. They must balance the autonomy necessary to maintain integrity with responsibility to elected politicians. Administrative leaders practice 'administrative conservatorship' or stewardship (Watt 2012: 9). The practices of stewardship are 'a form of statesmanship', which 'requires professional expertise, political skill, and a sophisticated understanding of what it means to be an active participant in governance'. Or, to employ an everyday simile, public leadership is like 'gardening', requiring time, patience, experience, and political awareness. They are 'quiet leaders' who are in 'for the long haul'. They are about continuity, learning from the past and preserving institutional memory (Frederickson and Matkin 2007: 36–8). Indeed, much government is about coping, the appearance of rule and keeping things going (Rhodes 2011); it is about stewardship.

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

### Practical wisdom

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

Mandarins do not just providing specific policy advice, although, of course, they do provide such advice. They provide what a former Head of the Home Civil Service, Lord Bridges, calls 'a kind of rarefied common sense' based on 'the 'slow accretion and accumulation of experience' (Bridges 1950: 50-51). This collective or institutional memory refers to the

organized, selective retelling of the past to make sense of the present. Senior public servants  
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explain past practice and events to justify recommendations for the future (see also Wass 1984: 49-50). They draw on this memory to spot hidden or unexpected problems – snags. They may irritate ministers, and it may be seen as a delaying tactic, but it is integral to the forensic examination of policy proposals. And politicians recognise its importance if, at times, belatedly. For example, the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, when reflecting on his torrid experience in office also thought he should have paid more attention to 'institutional wisdom'.

Of course, there are limits to learning from experience; to relying on institutional memory. As March (2010: 114) concludes 'learning from experience is an imperfect instrument for finding truth'. It is ambiguous, constructed and contested. Yet practical wisdom, and the memory and experience on which it is based, lies at the core of the craft of the political-administrator.

### Probity

When Kane and Patapan (2006: 713 and 719)) talk of the Aristotelean moral virtues relevant for public administration, they itemise courage, temperance, generosity, magnanimity, mildness, humour, truthfulness, moderation, and wisdom. Harold Nicolson (1950: 126), a former British diplomat, took for granted the virtues of intelligence, knowledge, discernment, hospitality, charm, industry, courage and tact. The UK Civil Service's code highlights the four values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality. (6) All have in common the idea that public servants should have the quality of possessing strong moral principles; that is probity. The lists vary in length and emphasis but honesty, decency and loyalty are always to



the fore. As one senior public servant observed about a colleague who had revealed secret information:

They were sensitive issues and [the Minister's] interest in them was a serious interest in doing the right thing by the public interest. This man had been placed in this tremendous position of trust at the heart of this process working to the permanent secretary, working to the secretary of state, and he betrayed it. For [the Minister] who believed strongly in two-way loyalty, he couldn't cope with this. I mean he just thought it was unbelievable.

### Judgement

The ability to make considered decisions is close to practical wisdom but under this heading I want to explore a distinctive notion; 'appreciation'. Introduced by Sir Geoffrey Vickers in 1965, the idea was a pioneering contribution the role of sense making in organizations (see also Young 1977; Weick 1995). For Vickers appreciation is the web or net of reality concepts and value concepts we use to make sense of the observed world and of how we communicate in that world. Appreciation is about the mental maps we use to make our way in the world. .

Departments have shared mental maps. They are a store house of knowledge and experience of what worked and what aroused public criticism. This departmental philosophy can be understood as an appreciative system; it is the net of beliefs about reality and values through which public servants understand their world. It provides the organised, selective retelling of the past. Senior public servants recover past practice and events to explain why things are as they are, and to justify recommendations for the future. The inherited traditions of the

organization, and the storytelling that hands down that tradition to new arrivals, form this departmental philosophy. It is a form of folk psychology. It provides the everyday theory and shared languages for storytelling. It is the collective memory of the department; a retelling of yesterday to make sense of today (see Rhodes 2011: chapter 9).

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

### Diplomacy

Nicholson (1950: 15 and 116-20) defines diplomacy as 'the management of international affairs by negotiation'. He also identifies seven diplomatic virtues: truthfulness; precision; calm; good temper; patience; modesty; and loyalty (to the government one serves). For all its slightly quaint, air Nicholson identifies an important skill. Diplomacy may be an old-fashioned word but the arts of negotiation and persuasion remain current. We have several everyday expressions to cover this skill. We talk of sitting in the other person's chair, standing in the other person's shoes, and looking at the world through other peoples' spectacles. As Sir Douglas Wass (a former Head of the British Civil Service) said 'finesse and diplomacy are an essential ingredient in public service' (cited in Hennessy 1989: 150). Diplomacy with its focus on spanning boundaries and facilitating interaction is an old art in a new context; the skills of diplomacy lie at the heart of NPG. When NPG talks of boundary spanning, and collaborative leadership, it is talking about diplomacy in twenty-first century guise. It is an old art in a new context; the skills of diplomacy lie at the heart NPG.

### Political nous

The dictionary definition of craft also talks of the skill of deceiving others as in 'the secretary was unequalled in his guile and cunning'. 'Public administrators need to be "crafty" to fulfil their responsibilities' (Berkley and Rouse 2009: 18). They practice 'politics' with a small 'p'. The dark arts of politics are not the sole preserve of the elected politician (see Meltsner 1990). The public servant may be neutral between political parties but they are not neutral either in the service of their department or their minister. Both are territorial. As one senior public servant reports: 'The Minister stands over my desk and says, 'I want you ring up [your civil servant counterpart]', and say, 'I want you to pass a message to [your Minister] which is "get your tanks off my lawn"'.

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

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

They have a wide view of politics. They do not mean party politics and the party caucus. They may be unable to resist the temptation to gossip about such matters but they do not take part. Rather, 'politics' refers to the politics of public administration, the core executive, parliament and the media. Every political-administrator must defend their minister and their department in parliament. They must ask, 'What will this look like on the front page of *The Daily Telegraph*?' The art is coping. The aim is survival; still being here.

Learning from experience is at the heart of practical wisdom and it is how public servants pick up their political nous. The point is appreciated in theory by a former Australian prime minister who saw public service experience as the 'ideal' training and preparation for the job of his Chief of Staff (Howard 2001). Yet, in practice, fewer and fewer public servants have experience in the Prime Minister's Office. Departments no longer have staff with experience of working in the networks at the heart of government. Conversely, these core networks lack knowledge about departments. Historically, rotations in ministerial and prime ministerial offices were an essential developmental pathway for officials and a source of practical wisdom for politicians (Barberis 1996). All core executives have opportunities for aspirants for the top jobs to learn from experience and to be socialised into the rules of the political game. Increasingly they do not avail themselves of the opportunity (Rhodes and Tiernan 2014). Nonetheless, political nous remains a core part of a political-administrator's craft.

Of course, reducing the craft of the public servant to seven skills over-simplifies. Moreover, without original fieldwork, we do not know what we do not know.<sup>(7)</sup> For example, public servants compare stories using tacit knowledge embedded in such words as 'sound', 'judgement', 'experience' and 'safe pair of hands'. They communicate understood, shared but tacit, not transparent, meaning. Beyond that we have little or no information about how such

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comparisons are made or the rules of engagement for forensic interrogations. Also, the article separates the skills for ease of exposition. In practice, they are warp and weft. Where does diplomacy end and judgement begin? How do you counsel a minister without calling on your political nous? Finally, this analysis diverts attention away from the most important skill of all; the ability to choose between and manage the mix of skills. At the heart of their craft is the ability to learn from experience and alter the mix of skills to fit both the specific context in which they work, and the person for whom they work

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

NPM and NPG have introduced valuable reforms. It would be foolish to advocate the waste of public money. Better management that seeks to enhance economy, efficiency and effectiveness is like mom and apple pie; everyone agrees it is a good thing so it is hard to criticise. Network governance requires new skills in managing the mix of bureaucracy, markets and networks. Such meta-governing involves policy narratives, boundary spanning and collaborative leadership. But in adopting these new skills, we must not forget that traditional skills remain essential. Traditional, NPM and NPG skills all remain relevant. It is not a question of traditional skills versus NPM and NPG. It is a question of what works; of what skills fit in a particular context. For too long, we have focused on the new and the fashionable. It is time to pay more attention to bureaucracy and the traditional skills of bureaucrats as part of the repertoire of governing (see also Goodsell 2004; Olsen 2006).

Why do we need a preservation order on the public service? Why are the traditional skills important? The short answer is because the traditional craft assumes the primacy of politics.

Ministers are not managers. It is not why they went into politics. Only a minority take an interest.

This simple brute fact undermines reform. The public service exists to give ministers what they want and most do not want anything to do with management reform. As Sir Frank Cooper, former Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence observed with characteristic vigour:

Personally, I regard the minister-as-manager as nonsense. Ministers are not interested. It's not part of the Minister's stock-in-trade. ... It's not what they went into politics for (cited in Hennessy 1989: 609)

At best, it is not a priority. At worst, it is not even on the radar as both confront a world of high risk and 24/7 media coverage that dominates their everyday lives. They live in a closed world of overlapping roles and responsibilities. The distinctions between policy and management, politician and public servant are meaningless when confronted by the imperative to cope and survive. Political-administrators are dependent on one another to carry out their respective roles, each role one side of the same coin. For example, Podger (2009: 10), when secretary for Health and Aged Care in Australia, records spending 40 per cent of his time supporting the minister. Every rude surprise demonstrates their dependence. Genuflecting to the opening narration of the TV series, they live in 'The Twilight Zone'; the middle ground between light and shadow, between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. It is a cocoon of willed ordinariness that exists to protect the minister. Private offices, staffers and top public servants exist to domesticate trouble, to defuse problems, and to take the emotion out of a crisis. Protocols are the key to managing this pressurised existence. They are an exercise in willed ordinariness.

Critics who blame the public service for the slow pace of change should look instead to ministers. They are the main wellspring of change in government and they are not interested in public service reform. In the eyes of both ministers and senior public servants, the job of

ministers had not been transformed by either NPM or NPG. They continue to live in a world of blurred accountability: 'the current arrangements are fraught with ambiguities – and remember this suits both sides'. Ministers and top public servants are political-administrators dependent on one another if they are to succeed. Public servants recognise both the dependence and the critical role of ministers: 'clarifying the role of ministers and officials is the major unresolved constitutional question' (senior officials cited in in Lodge and Rogers 2006: ix and 63). This ambiguity undermines reform.

In the 1950s, Sir Edward Bridges wrote that it was 'the duty of the civil servant to give his Minister the fullest benefit of the storehouse of departmental experience, and to let the waves of the practical philosophy wash against ideas put forward by his ministerial masters'. In the 2000s, the head of the Australian public service insisted 'we have something unique to offer' and itemised the capacity to stand aside from vested interests and focus on the national interest; and experience about what works (Watt 2012: 5). The quotes span sixty years, yet both public servants share a distinct and distinctive craft. Despite the many challenges posed by the various waves of 'reform', their profession continues to offer counselling, stewardship, practical wisdom, probity, judgement, diplomacy and political nous. Their remarks do not represent special pleading by the public service. They are descriptions of the craft of public servants. Even committed reformers need to understand the continuing relevance of these old skills to the new worlds of NPM and NPG.

The bureaucracies of yesteryear were not a golden era, but they had some virtues. They were home to statesmen, albeit statesmen in disguise. Given that we so love dichotomies like steering not rowing, it is now time for new one: NPM and NPG are about the low politics of

implementation and the craft is about the high politics of serving the minister. We have had an era of thinking small. It is time to think big again and return to the craft; to statecraft.

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## Notes

(1) For the UK, see: <http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Civil-Service-Reform-Plan-acc-final.pdf>;  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/307250/Civil-Service-Capabilities-Plan-2013.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307250/Civil-Service-Capabilities-Plan-2013.pdf); and  
<http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/about/improving/preparing-for-the-new-civil-service-competency-framework>. For Australia, see: <http://www.apsc.gov.au/learn/aps-leadership-and-core-skills-strategy-2014-15-refresh/leadership-and-core-skills>; and  
<http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications-and-media/current-publications/integrated-leadership-system>. Last accessed 13 October 2014.

(2) See: 'Indicators of Potential for Permanent Secretaries'. The document was produced by YSC, business psychology consultants, for the Cabinet Office. Available@:  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/07\\_07\\_14\\_permanentsecretary.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/07_07_14_permanentsecretary.pdf). Last accessed

14 October 2014. The comments by Maude and Butler can be found@:

<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-28202293>; and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-25163208>. Last accessed 14 October 2014.

This debate is common to most Westminster systems. For example, on Australia, see Watt 2012; on Britain see Lodge and Rogers 2006; on Canada, see Heintzman 2014; on New Zealand see: Mulgan 2004; and for a comparative analysis see Rhodes, Wanna and Weller 2009.

(3) See for example: Barberis 1996; Bridges 1950; Butler 1992; Campbell and Halligan 1992; Campbell and Wilson 1995; Lodge. and Rogers 2006; Podger 2009; Rhodes 2011; Savoie 2003; Shergold 2004; Wanna et al 2012; Wass 1984; Watt 2012; and Wilson 2003. To illustrate the argument, I have also drawn on a database of some 140 interviews with ministers, public servants and political staffers conducted with my colleague Anne Tiernan since 2002 (and continuing).

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

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



(6) Ethnographic fieldwork is well suited to finding out what we do not know about the craft of the public administrator. Participant observation is the best option but a combination of ethnographic interviews, focus groups and para-ethnography would tease out the tacit knowledge characteristics of all crafts (see Rhodes 2015).