A framework for comparative research on the political role of higher civil servants

by F.F. RIDLEY,

Professor of Political Theory and Institutions, University of Liverpool.

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I

The topic I am suggesting will, I hope, combine two interests and serve a number of useful purposes in the study of comparative administration.

1. First, a contribution to the methodology of comparative administration : the purpose is to develop conceptual frameworks for analysing and comparing the environmental factors that shape the administrative/bureaucratic systems of a group of related countries. At the simplest, one might hope to agree on ways in which the relevant material for each country can be organized so that systems-in-their-environment can be described in ways that make comparison between countries possible. If one takes countries where a number of major environmental factors are similar (notably the stage of socio-economic development and the broad values underlying the political system), one might hope to pin-point more easily some of the reasons for difference. There may even be some practical use if one comes to consider the possibility of transferring administrative arrangements from one country to another, e.g. in the context of some domestic reform programme.

2. From a number of conversations with visiting academics, I get the impression that a particular topic of interest at the moment is the political role of higher civil servants in Europe. Indeed, some research is in progress and this is always a good starting point. Apart from the academic interest of explaining why bureaucracies differ in this respect, this again seems to me a question of some practical political importance.

My idea, therefore, is to link the two aspects mentioned above by looking at :

1. The political role of bureaucracies in the countries of Western Europe.

2. The environmental factors that shape this role.

3. The way in which these factors can be organized in a conceptual fromework. This would be a pigeon-hole framework in the first place, though one might go on to propose a generalised model of influences on the bureaucratic system.

4. If we can get beyond these preliminary stages, i.e. collect sufficient date to fill the pigeon holes, we may be able to see what the similarities and differences are, and whether a number of more concrete, though still ideal-type, environmental models emerge. We may be able to differentiate between primary and secondary environmental factors, a point relevant to the transferability of institutions.

5. Put more specifically in terms of the political role of bureaucracies, we may see not merely why different bureaucracies play different roles but also how important these are for the overall working of the administrative systems of the countries concerned.

I would like to make a number of points in amplification of the above with reference to the emphasis on Western European countries, the definition of political role, the definition of bureaucracy, and the broad listing of environmental factors.

II

I deliberately stress Western Europe because I want to suggest the methodological and practical advantage of comparing bureaucratic systems in environments which ought, on the face of it, to have a fair amount in common : advanced (complex and industrialized) economies with considerable mixed-economy elements ; urbanised societies with relatively high living standards, extensive social services and a relatively educated population ; liberal-democratic politics (or at least political ideologies) with party and interest group participation in policy making and formalized protection of citizens' rights ; legal-rational administrative systems with large and highly qualified bureaucracies, subject to extensive career regulations, and with the administration itself subject to a wide variety of parliamentary, judicial and ombudsman-type con-

trols ; extensive state intervention on economic and social affairs for reasons including the complexity of socio-economic life, the expectation of citizens that the state will promote economic prosperity and social justice, and probably the acceptance of considerable moral responsibility for such development by the bureaucracy itself.

This should make explanation of the nevertheless very significant differences between Western European bureaucracies more specific, and thus rather more concrete, than might otherwise be the case. The ecological analysis of administrative systems has so far tended to concentrate on developing and third world countries with major socio-economic differences as well as differences of culture. Studies of public administration in Western Europe, on the other hand, have for a variety of reasons tended to be non-comparative and, on the whole, non-ecological. It seems to me, therefore, that there is a major gap in the literature of comparative administration here.

III

By the political role of bureaucracies I mean a number of things. Broadly, one could start with the following three headings.

1. Doctrine : their role defined by :

a) ideology of the political system,

b) constitutional principles,

c) formal rules relating to the public service.

2. Attitudes.

a) self-perception — how bureaucrats see their role in state and society, professional values,

b) perception of others — including politicians, organisations, public at large.

3. Activities : what they actually do.

This brings us to the problem of defining political activity. The word political is notoriously ambiguous but it is probably wise to start with as comprehensive notions as possible for fear of missing something important, even if one later narrows the definition. One might distinguish between :

1. Political as used in popular speech, basically party-political.

2. Political in a machinery of government sense, e.g. exercise of functions that might elsewhere be the responsibility of elected rather than appointed officials.

3. Political in the sense of participating in the decision-making or policy proprocess.

I would suggest the following classification, however, which includes all the above but categorises from the point of view of the administrative system, taking as starting point whether the activities are internal or external to be administration.

1. *External activities :*

a) public expression of views on (party-political) controversial matters,

b) participation in party-political and similar activities,

c) participation in own right in the political institutions of the country, e.g. elected assemblies,

d) participation in own name in other bodies,

e) participation in the work of political or other bodies on behalf of the government (unmandated representative),

f) participation, more narrowly, as spokesman of the government (mandated representative).

2. *Internal activities :*

a) representation of ministers in more than a « his master's voice » capacity — whether in terms of discretion allowed or simply form of speech (use of « I » rather than « my minister ») — e.g. as national representative on EEC committees or in dealing with interest groups and local authorities,

b) official exercise of functions that might in some systems be regarded as political or governmental, e.g. certain functions of French prefects as « representatives of the state », or heading government agencies that might elsewhere have ministerial heads, e.g. the French Planning Commissariat,

c) participation within the administration in bureaux which have a more or less recognized political character, e.g. the French *cabinet,* or doing work of a political character for the minister, e.g. as private secretary,

d) participation in the policy-making process and influence on policy outcomes — if we are not careful, however, we come close to a discussion of the much wider question of civil servants' influence in general (this may remain true even if one restricts attention to a number of cases of politically controversial policy making),

e) extent to which policy advice can be couched in political language or must remain formally neutral,

f) discretion in the making of individual decisions that have a recognised or latent political character.

I would expect a better list, perhaps with more examples as a guide, to emerge from preliminary suggestions, papers and discussion.

IV

We now come to the definition of the bureaucracy with whose political role we are concerned here. I take it we mean the higher civil service and not, say, the private party-political activities of lower grades. But there may well be a problem of defining the higher service in terms comparable between countries.

It may, moreover, be felt relevant to include the political role of civil service unions, and this would certainly include all grades.

There is a more serious question. It is easy enough to discuss the political activities of individual civil servants. But the purpose here is to consider the role of the bureaucracy. Talk about the bureaucracy (or, for example, technocracy) tends to imply that members form a class, share attitudes and, more important in this context, act as a class. I do not want to enter here the problems of defining class or other terms that serve a similar purpose, or whether the higher civil service merely forms an elite which includes influentials. I think, however, one might ask the following sorts of questions.

1. What role do individual bureaucrats play ? How many ? Are there patterns ?

2. Is the bureaucracy united in outlook and interests ? Has it an ideology, a tradition, shared values, a common interest ? Are there any respects in which it acts as a class ?

3. Is the bureaucracy sub-divided into several groups, each with its own set of attitudes and perhaps different roles ?

a) If so, is this a reflection of organisational factors ?

1° administrative structures : division of responsibility between diffe-
rent administrative agencies or services (e.g. financial and technical ;
saving and spending ; central and field ; line and staff ; executive and
supervisory),

2° civil service structures : probably linked with the foregoing, e.g.
into corps with different functions and traditions.

b) Is it a reflection of non-organisational factors, e.g. groups formed
by officials sharing party-political or other opinions ?

4. If it seems that civil servants play a political role or have political
influence as individuals, how far do they nevertheless depend for their
effectiveness on their official position ?

Could they play the same role if they were private citizens ?

5. Indeed, taking this further, how far are their attitudes and acti-
vities in such cases shaped by their membership of the bureaucracy at
all ? Would they be the same if they were private citizens ?

V

I now turn to what I would like to regard as the central theme of
this proposal, the environment in which bureaucracies operate. The first
thing is to see if one can list in advance of research the sorts of fac-
tors that are likely to shape the political role of bureaucrats. It seems
to me that one might as well start off with something like a check-list
rather than a model. I put it this way because, certainly at this first
attempt, it seems very hard to produce a clearly defined set of cate-
gories between which all influences could be divided, so that one could
draw a picture with the bureaucratic sub-system at the centre and
a number of forces surrounding it and acting on it. Too many factors
seem to come under several headings, not necessarily because of their
ambiguity but because one set of external factors may be translated
into other external factors and then into internal ones : e.g. history
turns into political culture and constitutional principles, which turn into
public service rules. As a start, however, it does seem worth listing
as extensively as possible (regardless of duplication) all the types of
factors that may affect bureaucratic systems and explain differences bet-
ween them, leaving it to later contributions and discussion to see whe-
ther a neater model can be drawn.

I referred earlier to pigeon-holes. By that I mean that for the sake of
providing a comprehensive check-list/framework, we may have to leave
open the question whether hard data is available, or is even likely

to become available later. In some cases, indeed, relevant data is by its nature not suitable for quantification and to that extent may not be regarded as sufficiently hard by some. The advantage of pigeon-holes is that one can use them to sort out what one has, leaving some empty, if necessary, for reference.

Certainly, I think one may have to start with impressions rather than figures, and in certain respects one may have to end in this way also. I do not think this should detract from the enterprise. Too many projects in comparative administration, I suspect, have structured their research to the quantifiable and have thus seriously limited the scope of their comparison, neglecting important factors as a result. The purpose, here, is to compare bureaucratic systems in their entire environment, to see it as an inter-related whole, and a price must be paid for this.

To that extent, it may be sensible to start with straight accounts of each country, as full as possible but based on available knowledge and not hesitating to make use of general impressions where necessary. One can see as one goes along how much can be drawn out of this. In that sense, a check-list may be treated as a way of presenting this material.

One way to start the list is to distinguish between influences that are external and internal to the administration (as we are focusing on bureaucracies, the administrative system may be treated as environmental).

1. *External to the administration.*

a) History : in a way this is a catch-all category as everything, even the most formalised arrangements, had its origins in something that happened in the past (indeed, even regulations — or the making of the regulations — can be treated as a historical event). Some repetition in historical format is nevertheless worthwhile because it gives an overview and a sense of causal relations that may be harder to grasp in too analytic an approach. Moreover, there are likely to be a number of historical factors, more or less unique to each country and not easily classifiable, for which this heading could serve as a residual category.

b) Political culture : in some ways a repetition of the above. Ideology of the system ; political values ; public attitudes ; civic culture ; deference ; respect for authority or expertise ; legitimacy of the government.

c) Formal constitutional order : principles of the constitution and governmental system, e.g. formal distribution of powers, principles of ministerial responsibility.

d) Current politics : the role of party politics ; political and other conflicts ; stability and instability of the governmental system ; acceptance of the party in power ; specific political issues such as postwar purges or cold war elimination of communists from the public service, etc.

e) Prevailing socio-economic conditions : the tasks facing the government and bureaucrats at the time ; economic crises ; demands for social reform ; technological problems.

f) Socio-economic system : classes and the background of bureaucrats ; class attitudes and class interests ; religious and linguistic divisions of society and their reflection in the bureaucracy ; mobility between public and private sectors (e.g. *pantouflage*); social and other links between senior civil servants and other elites.

g) Power structure in society : other elites and their roles ; reaction of bureaucrats ; scope left e.g. existence of a power vacuum or a balance which allows bureaucrats to arbitrate.

h) Éducational system : as it affects the recruitment and attitudes of bureaucrats.

2. *Internal to the administration.*

a) Formal rules governing the public service : career rules relating to recruitment, promotion and security of tenure ; rules specifically relating to political neutrality ; rules regarding appointment to certain posts, e.g. appointments at government's discretion.

Practice with regard to above.

b) Formal organisation of the executive, e.g. :

— directorial posts at government's discretion, perhaps with semi-political character ;
— private offices of ministers *(cabinets)*;
— special advisory groups, think-tanks, outside experts serving for a period ;
— civil service posts with some political or state-representative functions such as prefects ;
— semi-autonomous or non-ministerial agencies with civil service heads, e.g. Planning Commissariat ;

— distribution of authority within public service ;
— separation of functions within public service between policy making and office management (e.g. old Administrative/Executive Classes in Britain); separation between different branches of the administration (e.g. the existence of specialist corps with responsibility for a sector of affairs, the French technical corps); between line administrators and specialist advisers ; other organisational factors.

Practice with regard to all the above. Links between structure of the civil service and elitism or technocracy.

c) Formal rules governing administrative procedures and methods of control ;

— judicial controls, administrative courts, extent to which administration is regarded as a quasi-judicial process and extent of discretion in individual decisions ;
— public expenditure controls.

Practice with regard to above.

d) Training within the administration : role of Civil Service Schools and attitudes acquired.

e) Effects of change within the administration ; growth and decline of the bureaucracy and its effects on staffing and attitudes : effect of new functions, new agencies, new techniques and new types of personnel ; effect of stability and instability.

f) Forms of interaction with external environment : dealings with parlementarians, local authorities, organised interests, other bodies.

The list of internal factors is more detailed than that of external factors simply because, as a student of governmental institutions rather than a political sociologist, I have found it easier to think quickly of such categories. But this is again only a first effort and one would hope for something both fuller and neater to emerge.

VI

This framework is concerned in the main with factors determining e.g. whether bureaucrats are allowed to play a political role, how they see that role and how they actually play it. It is only tangentially concerned with their actual political views or the policies they advocate. It concentrates, in other words, on the form not the content.

This was really my intention — to consider the role of the bureaucracy in the governmental system in the same way as one might consider the role of the legislature or even political parties in general terms, as one of the structure of the system.

But clearly it can be argued that their political views are relevant to how bureaucrats see their role and the part they play. A reformist will see it differently and act differently from a supporter of the status quo. To that extent political views are another intermediary factor, shaped e.g. by the social background of officials and shaping their self-perception of their role.

It is equally clear that a comparison of form rather than content would leave a crucial part of the picture unpainted. Certain of the headings in my check-lists in fact relate to political content but more would have to be added. On the other hand, a model of environmental influences might become quite unmanageable if it also tries to explain political attitudes, and even more so if it added policy orientations. The same would apply if one tried to compare not merely the place the bureaucracy occupies in the political system but also the politics it pursues.

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