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Public administration in contested societies

Karl O'Connor (London: Palgrave Macmillan; 2014;
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I very much enjoyed *Public Administration in Contested Societies* by Dr Karl O'Connor. The book is an important analysis of how public servants think and work within a number of contested societies, including Belfast and Brussels. The book explores the interplay between public servants' multiple layers of identity and how these express themselves in a work context where they are required to act politically impartially while also remaining aware of, and responsive to, the needs of their political leaders. The book sees public service as a way of understanding the management of conflict within contested societies.

The book is based on a rigorous and widely tested methodology which specifically focuses on the subjective perspective of senior officials. As far as I can see, it is rare to see such rigour in the political science arena and also rare to see a meaningful focus on the psychology of public administration; which is ironic because in all of my time as a public servant this appears to be by far the most important factor in how effective (or not) we are as administrators.

I am very attracted by the work because it has been clear to me, working as a public servant, that: (a) each official's world view influences what they do and how they behave; (b) this overrides just about any other variable, including organisational structure. The research supports that view, if I understand the book correctly. It is also really interesting that, while passive representation is clearly a good thing, people (particularly at a senior level) build up an identity which moves well beyond their primary social identity. This is not at all surprising to me from my own experience, but it was good to see it confirmed. It may reflect the fact that when people are working in a political sphere, even if they are not politicians, they begin to see the

nuances and realities around official positions. The question is, can we systematically influence that professional identity to improve the quality of public administration or at least understand why it works when it works?

Importantly, it is clear already that political leaders and others do not want passive drones who push meaningless processes, but intelligent agents of change.

While the contested society angle was fascinating in this own right, and is worthy of more research, I think that there is something really interesting to be explored about the lessons of this work (and follow-on work) in terms of improving the quality of public administration and therefore public services and societal outcomes on a more general level. While the book focuses on societies which exist on a continuum in terms of whether they are contested, would it not be fair to say that all societies exist on such a continuum? For example, we can look to cases where developing constitutional frameworks – particularly supranational – result in an almost continuous contest in terms of boundaries, something that is unlikely to change in an increasingly globalised world. If one of the primary functions of democracy is to achieve the management of inherent societal tensions and the alignment of key players, then this would suggest that all democratic structures and the people working within them have a fundamental role in terms of conflict resolution and reconciliation in their day-to-day lives, even where constitutional questions have long been seen as ‘settled’.

In short, I think the book reflects an area of work which is of fundamental importance to the improvement of public administration and, from my perspective, has provided evidence and a form of language (professional representation) which explains why that is the case. (Having said that, I don’t like the term bureaucrat as it is a pejorative term in the real world regardless of how its use is intended. It is also reminiscent of public servants as ‘process-drones’ and, as such, is at odds with the book’s conclusions.)

On p. 148 the book identifies the research question ‘Why do bureaucrats belong to particular typologies?’ I think this is definitely the right question to start with and the answers would be of general interest to societies across the world. If we were pushing the practical angle, we might ask it slightly differently: ‘What perspectives do officials have in terms of their roles and do they belong to different typologies?’ ‘Which are the most useful perspectives and in which situations and why?’ ‘Do these perspectives change over time, and in

terms of organisational seniority?’ (I suspect they do.) For me, that begins to inform a conversation about the impact of professional identity and the extent to which this is amenable to systematic reform.

We can think about about doctors, lawyers, nurses and architects having world views that are strongly influenced by their professional identities, each of which has been formed by a long history and by a developing professional framework. Arguably, it is this professional representation or identity which drives much behaviour and which some have argued has been attacked to the detriment of public services. The question is whether we can create a professional identity for public officials that drives the ‘right’ behaviours?

This book is a step in the right direction.

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