

Civil Servants of Some Developed Democracies in a Comparative Vein

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Abstract: Civil servants can be said to be the key personnel in a country's administration. Their upbringing, outlook and vision are supposed to have tremendous effect on their activities and demcanour towards the clientele in particular and the citizens at large. Basic traits of civil servants of the topmost developed democracies in the world viz. Great Britain, United States of America, France and Japan have been enlarged in this article in a comparative genre. These countries have well developed civil services alongside mature and almost equally competent political institutions. But the relationships among civil servants, political leaders and citizens therein are no less complex. Though not exactly synonymous, the words civil servants and bureaucrats have been used as interchangeable in this article.

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Britain: The social background of the civil servants in Great Britain has in the past shown very little diversity. Before 2nd world war there was literally monopoly of the 'Oxbridge' graduates but situation has improved a lot thereafter for the ones that do not belong to this cohort. Age restrictions for entry have been largely abolished and females now make up a third of those entering the first stream (Butler, 1993:403). Now 'Redbrick' universities provide a good number of graduates that are capable of qualifying for the civil service examinations (Heady, 1996:241). The civil servants in Britain enjoy a fair amount of latitude in terms of their job tenure but that does not emanate from legal provisions but from protective tradition. In Great Britain, organizations maintain their effectiveness by relying on the old patterns of deference that binds inferiors and superiors within the limits of necessary cohesion (Crozier, 1964:233). The civil servants are expected to remain neutral and anonymous in their activities though the idea of anonymity has been watered down greatly in recent years with widespread exposure of civil servants to various committees and the media (Greenwood and Wilson, 1989:87). British civil servants never had an extra burden on them to contribute to the stability of the political machinery as is the case in France and Germany nor do they have to deal directly with the public by providing goods and services but recent reforms want them to be more interactive with the public (Falconer and

Ross, 1999:348). British civil service is largely a closed one and it does not welcome experts and people from other sectors. The incumbents don't chase jobs in private sectors either (Christoph in Dogan, 1975:50). The civil servants play significant role in policy making but the exact extent is difficult to determine. The civil servants have a substantial share in the political decision-making in Britain but that doesn't border on monopolizing that. By temperament, socialization, situation, resources, top civil servants are well placed to strongly influence the outcome of public policy but hardly do they transform it into sole proprietorship (Ibid.). The British civil servants believe in the aphorism of responsiveness to their citizen and this very attribute has been generally put down to the representative nature of the polity for quite a long time. (Heady, 1996:245). British high fliers - the younger officials who are likely to be assigned major responsibilities later - are quite intense in being responsive to the citizens and they are the most politically conscious, the most programmatically committed, the most egalitarian, and the most tolerant toward politicians and pluralism (Putnam in Dogan, 1975: 117). Honesty of British civil servants is remarkable. Only one official out of half a million has been found guilty of corruption in forty years since 2nd world war. The rumour as to bribes and graft is almost non-existent. The bureaucracy is very much divorced from red tape, which is rife in many countries. The civil servants

write in plain English rather than in legalistic and formal English. It is easy to approach them and they are usually accommodating to the people. Tax inspectors and customs officers are rarely disagreeable. Citizens are not penalized if they are late with their tax returns (Birch, 1990:144-45). British civil servants as Sayre summarizes are more orderly and symmetrical, more articulate, more prudent, more cohesive and more powerful in comparison to their American counterparts (Sayre, 1964:223).

However, in recent years starting from Thatcher's regime, the governments have been a little reluctant to confide in the bureaucracy and steps have been taken to bring that under a cover of broader control. Thatcher's government undertook the steps to emphasize managerial role of civil servants and weed out the bureaucrats that leak information and are not committed to the service. Loyalty to the party has been regarded as a plus point for the bureaucrats and the Thatcher government has whittled bureaucrats' role in policy making down considerably and accelerated a post war trend to appoint political sympathizers to advisory positions in line with political appointees in U.S.A. and ministerial cabinets in France. The successive governments were expected to follow suit (Kingdom, 1990:23). And that has been the case. Notwithstanding this shift in the governments' outlook, the

service orientation, competence, professionalism of the civil servants remain almost unscathed (Heady, 1996:247).

U.S.A.: As the American society is basically open and methods of civil service advancement are uniform, the upper echelons of the bureaucracy are, by and large, representative of the society though representation of black and women in the higher ranks is still a problem (Ibid, 1996:250). Affirmative action, however, has achieved some success in lessening that problem. As in Britain, the permanence of job depends on a protective tradition rather than legal safeguards. The civil servants are subjected to significant restrictions as to their participation in partisan political activities. They are, however, entitled to vote and express their political opinions. In the USA, organizations must use impersonal rules in order to achieve cohesion (Crozier, 1964:233). In contrast with Great Britain and continental Europe, interchange of careers in governmental and non-governmental organizations continues to be quite feasible and encouraged under the existing personnel practices though it weakens expertise, continuity and stability. Bureaucratic policy makers in the US must operate much more in public eye, which gives them more leeway, but at the same time involves greater risks. The relationship between the top career man and his political superior is rather vague. The civil servants are called on to defend their agencies position in many cases. But no clear line of demarcation between career and political executives exists in law, regulations, policy or tradition. The simultaneous presence of career administrators and political executives in top

posts presupposes a reciprocal relationship between them and that is very much present in the U.S.A. to lend sustenance to its administration. Instead of behind-the-scenes activity, as in Britain, the Americans want their bureaucrats to be more open to the public with the inevitable reactions that follow whether favourable or unfavourable. The American civil servant who earns high and lasting prestige in his society is usually one who most completely breaks the mask of anonymity and becomes a public figure (Sayre, 1964:228). Bureaucrats of America exercise substantial power but within defined framework of the agencies they work. They are neither willing nor able to consolidate bureaucratic power across the board. American bureaucrats have neither the motivation nor the capacity to stage a coup and seize power (Riggs, 1994:67). Riggs also claims that America has a unique political and administrative system, which has kept its bureaucracy weak enough not to be able to seize power but strong enough to administer reasonably well (ibid, 1998:27). The American bureaucrats are a more internally competitive, a more experimental, a noisier and less coherent, a less powerful but a more dynamic one in comparison to their British counterparts (Sayre, 1964:223). Bureaucratic usurpation and unresponsiveness was less a reality than a complaint. Americans were not really apprehensive about or dissatisfied with public administrators but they wouldn't like to admit that. The image of bureaucracy is, however, not that rosy these days. In recent years, the endemic distrust of government in the United States has heightened because public administrators and politicians have failed to solve a phalanx

of social and economic problems. Bureaucracy-bashing has become a common phenomenon in the United States. Businesses are critical of public bureaucracy for hindering corporate activities by forcing rigid rules and regulations upon them. Citizens think that government is spending tax dollars inefficiently while societal problems remain unsolved (Jun and Muto, 1995:132).

France: About 40 percent of the entrants into grand corps continue to come from family background in the civil service, mostly in higher ranks. Democratization of civil service has not occurred mainly because access to higher education continues to be primarily confined to students from upper-middle-class origins, with a heavy concentration of graduates from Paris rather than from provinces. This is France's equivalent to the public school / Oxbridge bias which is so often criticized in Britain (Owen in Kingdom, 1990:76). The recruitment system is closely geared to the education system, so that access to the higher civil service is restricted to those who also have access to higher education. France is undoubtedly a highly elitist society but it probably causes less heart-searching in France than in Britain because it is, at the same time, much less of a snobbish society than British society (Ibid.). Frenchmen are less worried about the fact that an elite exists, as long as its members are competent. In France, the civil service is an important and highly sought after channel of social ascent but entry into the civil service especially in its higher rank is not easy. The civil service is a career service ordinarily chosen early in life and pursued to retirement, with slight movement of individuals into and out of administrative corps in

mid-career (Heady, 1996:208). The French civil servants enjoy security of tenure on a lifetime basis, subject only to the unlikely loss of job on the basis of redundancy in which case compensation is provided. The remuneration is adequate but not lavish. Promotions and other changes in status are controlled in large measure by the civil service itself. Most civil servants are free to join political parties and take part in party activities. Those in positions of responsibility are not barred but are not supposed to disclose their civil service status or make use of information acquired because of their official assignments. Civil servants may become candidates for elective offices, and may serve in most local offices without giving up active duty but if they run and get elected to the national legislature, they must go on inactive status during the term of service, with a right to return later (Ridley and Blondel, 1969:50-51). French bureaucrats take an active and crucial part in public policy making; ultimate control lies, however, outside the bureaucracy. During the fifth republic bureaucratic participation in public policy making has been really impressive but it never amounted to appropriation of power (Vernardakis, 1988:447). In initiating changes, however, they cannot be prime movers like their Japanese counterparts (Crozier, 1964:255). Subordination to the dual executive - the president and the prime minister - has, however, weakened its autonomy to a degree but, by the same token, that has enhanced its ability to adjust. Bureaucrats of France had always a stabilizing effect on its lingering political instability. Before induction of fifth republic, French was a very unstable society with delicate political

institutions but its bureaucracy gave monolithic support to its steadiness and that's why it is said about French that the republic passes but the administration remains. In France, the view has taken deep roots that the political parties in power represent the government but civil service is the servant of the state. This view places the civil service under a solemn obligation to remain independent and impartial in its functioning (Maheshwari, 1997:86). Civil servants selected through a long-drawn-out screening process leave a stamp of their efficiency and impartiality on their work, which endears them all the more to the French society. French society at large treats its civil servants with respect, for it thinks that its interests are safe in the hands of the mandarins (Ibid, p.87). French civil servants are present almost everywhere. While British civil servants are concentrated in the capital and in large cities, their French counterparts are deployed all over the country (Ridley and Blondel, 1969:29). The field services or the external services of the central government have always been numerous. Their presence in the crucial institutions is virtually ubiquitous which distinguishes them from other civil services. Remarkably, all 11 prime ministers of France up to 1991 were civil servants and this speaks volumes for civil servants prominence in French politics (Rohr, 1991:287) and accordingly, France is rightly called the paradise of modern mandarins (Dogan, 1975:11).

Japan: In the Japanese civil service, all parts of Japan are, by and large, represented although with disproportionately large number of members from town and cities, particularly Tokyo. A

majority comes from middle class origins and eminent families are somewhat over represented. Sex discrimination, however, continues to deny women in equal opportunities in employment generally, including entry into the civil service (Heady, 1996:258). The proportion of women representation is, however, showing upward trend these days. (Sakamoto in Farazmand, 1991:119-122). The number of civil servants is relatively less in Japan compared to other developed democracies. It can be inferred from the fact that there were 40 public employees for every 1000 members of the population, compared to 120 in France, 81 in United States and 80 in the United Kingdom in 1991 (Masujima, 1997:247). The civil service of Japan is highly elitist, drawn as it is from a rather narrow educational base. Its members mostly come from ten or so universities, most of them national ones and nearly half from a single faculty, that is, law. The public sector employment system is closely structured to the educational pattern, which has the effect of making it a close-door system. Employment at an early age is the practice in Japan and it is neither common nor acceptable to change employees. Employment generally lasts for a lifetime (Tsuzi, 1984:53). Most join between the ages of 22-23 or just fresh from the university. In U.S.A. and Canada, persons of higher age with work-experience in more than one organization tend to join the civil service (Maheshwari, 1997:105). The elitism is, however, not a source of

contention as that is sufficiently neutralized by indigenous social mores. Historically and emotionally, Japanese society is a highly homogenous and reciprocative one bounded together by a network of understandings, obligations, duties and responsibilities and each member is expected to be governed by those. It requires to be noted that most suicides are committed in Japan for perceived violation of these unwritten codes (Ibid.). Elitism is further moderated by the economic development of the society with the middle class constituting eighty five percent of the population. Japanese are very emotional as to their idiosyncratic cultural norms and politeness. When a Japanese official speaks to a foreign official, he or she may speak at a very high level of politeness and the counterpart is expected to reciprocate in the same manner. A slight deviation might cause serious problems. As a result, the foreigners have to be familiar with wide range of politeness in place in Japan, which is rather an arduous task for them. In organizational relationships, use of proper language and verbal expression is a must. If a client fails to use proper expression, a government employee may interpret that as lack of respect and may be indifferent to the client and fail to help (Jun and Muto, 1995:130). The philosophy of Confucius and groupism has consistently fashioned their orientation; the passion for individualism is, however, catching on these days. (Ibid, p.134) The Japanese bureaucracy is deeply absorbed in making political

decisions and may become involved in active political life. Actually, the demarcation line between politicians and officials is not at all important in Japan (Heady, 1996:260). In Japan at the higher levels this distinction has not always been evident as the same officials discharged political and bureaucratic functions most often. In Japan, active career bureaucrats often hold positions and carry out functions usually reserved for political appointees in other countries. More importantly, the elitist status of higher civil servants is retained after they retire, giving them better prospects for postretirement placement than are usually available to their counterparts in Great Britain or the United States. In addition to joining other lucrative organizations, their inclusion in the cabinets is not negligible. The effectiveness and efficiency of the higher civil service are independent of political ideology. The bureaucracy has functioned with relative success under all sorts of governments to date and that speaks for its tremendous amount of resilience and adaptability (Kubota quoted in Heady, 1996:261). There seems to be some similarities between French and Japanese civil service but unlike French bureaucracy which main function is to maintain law and order in a rebellious society, Japanese bureaucratic power has a decisive role as a prime mover (Crozier, 1964:231). The political weight of the Japanese civil service has been greater than that of other political actors including Parliament, parties and the interests groups. Williams is emphatic

in depicting the true colour of Japanese bureaucracy. In his words, the bureaucracy has normally dominated the legislative process, and in this narrow sense can be said to have ruled while the Diet reigned (quoted in Heady, 1996:265). This supremacy is likely to increase in future. So, in terms of power Japanese bureaucracy is always a cut above other developed bureaucracies. The image of bureaucracy is quite contrary to that of American bureaucrats. Japanese bureaucracy is able to maintain its image of being honest, responsible and fair. Because of this, citizens believe that government is reasonably efficient, responsive, competent, and protective of lives of citizens (Jun and Muto, 1995:132). There is, however, strong tide for reforms in Japan in the wake of political corruption, rising deficit and tax cuts, but bureaucracy and ruling political party have been alleged to have formed a clique to thwart the reform moves (Ibid, 1998:195).

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