

Chapter 2:

Public Administration in Small States

The previous chapter commenced by noting that in some respects small states are not very different from medium-sized and large states. This observation applies as much to public administration as to other spheres. The standard works on public administration, some of which are listed at the end of this chapter, contain material that is applicable in almost all settings.

However, it is also possible to identify features and strategies of public administration that are associated with small size. These are the concern of this chapter. It begins with discussion on the personal relationships in small systems, before turning to the tendency for governments to be particularly dominant in small states. The third section discusses the influence of politics in the bureaucracy, and is followed by comments on the total number and functions of ministries in different countries. Fifthly, the chapter notes matters of centralisation and decentralisation.

1. Personal Relationships

It was noted in Chapter 1 that small states have highly personalised and transparent societies. This has an effect on the operation of the bureaucracy, and the management implications of the situation will be discussed in Chapter 4. Meanwhile it is worth noting that many implications are positive, though some may be problematic.

Beginning with the positive side:

- Close relationships may speed decision-making, and can generate trust and confidence.
- Decision-making is not as abstract as in large states. Administrators can easily see the human impact of their decisions, both within their bureaucracies and within the society as a whole.

This may make the administrators more sensitive.

- Senior administrators may be better aware of the capacities of their subordinates, and of the background factors which shape those characteristics.
- Individuals with innovative ideas can have a large impact on the whole system, introducing changes which improve its operation and effectiveness.
- Interpersonal relationships based on ties that extend far beyond the workplace may strengthen loyalties and team work. As noted in the Malta case study for the Commonwealth project:

The personal and social dimensions of a small civil service in a small country play a most prominent role in the way individuals perform, some most conscientiously and efficiently.

Of course, there may also be another side to the coin. In small states:

- The need always to be conscious of who is related to whom, who is antagonistic to whom, etc., may distort and delay decision-making. As the Malta case study also noted, officials may:

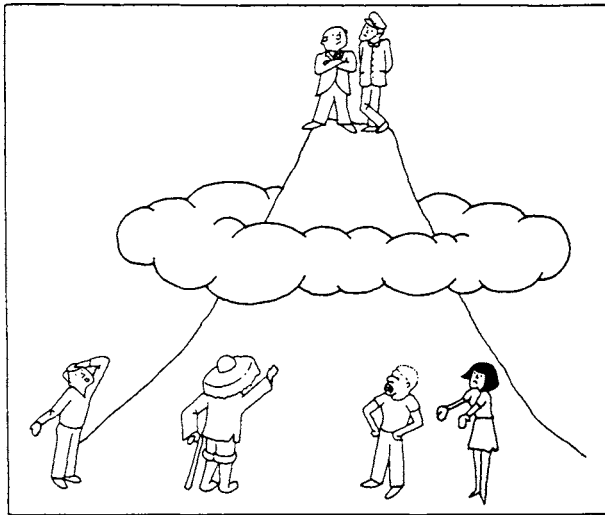
envy the impersonality and formality that exist in larger systems where it is easier for officialdom to be faceless.

- Differences in personality may produce conflicts which are not easy to resolve in a small organisation and which may lead to inefficiency. The Jersey case study pointed out that:

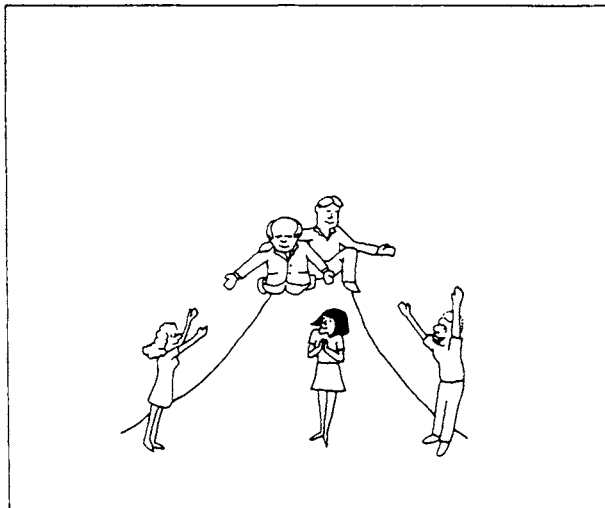
Conflicts can consume energy and time which would otherwise be directed at the Ministry's objectives, and the loss is proportionately greater in a small Department.

- A competitive relationship between two individuals may have consequences for the whole organisation. The Montserrat case study referred to a case in which:

Two individuals in particular have been in fierce competition for nearly a decade and their tussle has gradually reached higher echelons as each has been promoted. Their personal rivalries have thus had increasingly severe implications for the entire system.



In large states, senior administrators are often distant from the people, whom they cannot know personally. This sometimes causes dissatisfaction and a lack of harmony.



But in small states senior administrators can interact with the people much more easily and on a much more personal basis. This is a strong advantage for small states.

- Systems may be vulnerable to poorly-conceived innovations as well as well-conceived ones. The small system may lack the checks and balances of a large system, which make it volatile. This was mentioned in the Kiribati case study, for example.

These features may require special management strategies to maximise the advantages and minimise the disadvantages. Some such strategies are identified in subsequent chapters of this book.

2. Relative Size of Government

It has been noted by Bacchus and Brock (1987, p.3) that:

In small states the size of the public service expressed as a percentage of the total population, tends to be disproportionately large. Further, the small number of clients for whom such services have to be provided makes it difficult for the administration of small states to enjoy economies of scale.

Certain functions, such as preparation of development plans, creation of mechanisms for paying teachers' salaries, and representation at international meetings, have to be conducted whether the state is large or small. Some economies in staffing may be achieved by asking individuals to undertake multiple jobs, but there are limits on the extent to which this is possible. In Montserrat, for example, it has proved impossible to reduce the ratio of education administrators to school pupils below 1:520. Large countries have much higher ratios.

Of course the magnitude of the bureaucracy depends on many factors other than the size of population. These include:

- the philosophy of the government,
- what the country can afford,
- whether or not the economy is centrally planned,
- whether extra government officials are needed to serve remote areas, and, in the short term,
- whether or not the government is operating a major development project.

International comparisons of civil service sizes encounter many problems of definition and data availability, but it is worth noting that Heller & Tait's (1984) study of 61 states found a wide range not only between

The Lack of Economies of Scale

The lack of economies of scale in the administrative system of small states is dramatically illustrated by the Curriculum Development Unit in Tonga. Because the authorities wish to cover all major subjects at all levels of the education system, the unit has an establishment of 29 posts:

- 7 Senior Education Officers,
- 14 Assistant Senior Education Officers,
- 7 Education Officers, and
- 1 Clerk/typist.

Tonga has a population of 101,000. At this ratio, the curriculum development units of:

- Papua New Guinea (population 3.5 million) would have 1,000 staff,
- France (population 55.6 million) would have 17,000 staff,
- Japan (population 122.1 million) would have 37,000 staff, and
- India (population 781.4 million) would have 234,000 staff!

However, it must also be recognised that the CDU staff in Tonga also spend time on other roles. In this respect they are multi-functional, and their official designations are potentially misleading.

countries of different sizes but also among countries of similar size. The country with greatest government dominance was Sweden (population 8,400,000), which had 14.66 government employees per 100 people. At the other end of the scale was Burundi (population 4,900,000), which had only 0.51 government employees per 100 people. Among small countries the range was from 10.21 in Barbados (population 252,000) to 1.94 in Belize (population 159,000).

3. Politics and the Bureaucracy

A second feature of small-state realities concerns the traditional western view that bureaucracies should be politically neutral. According to this view administrators should be separated from politicians, and the role of the administrators is merely to implement the policies determined by the politicians. Its classic form may be illustrated by a quotation from a British report (in Caiden 1982, p.77):

There are spheres of activity legitimately open to the ordinary citizen in which the Civil Servant can play no part, or only a limited part. He is not to indulge in political or party controversy, lest by so doing he should appear no longer the disinterested adviser of Ministers able impartially to execute their policy. He is bound to maintain a proper reticence in discussing public affairs and more particularly those with which his own Department is concerned. And lastly, his position clearly imposes upon him restrictions in matters of commerce and business from which the ordinary citizen is free.

Yet in practice, senior public administrators are always influential political actors. Politicians rely on the administrators for advice, and the nature of that advice can significantly shape the nature of the policies proclaimed by the politicians. Also, the conventional doctrine seems to deny to public servants some of the basic political rights which are commonly advocated for all citizens of society. This aspect of conventional theory may therefore be challenged in all states, both large and small.

Nevertheless, it remains true that the model is still widely advocated in states of all sizes. Caiden (1982) gives examples in which the model has been advocated in the USA (population 243,800,000); and at the other end of the scale Murray (1985) gives examples from Niue (population 3,000). Reference was also made to the concept in the workshops which contributed to this book.

Yet while the model may be questionable in all contexts, it is especially questionable in small states. Expanding on the Niue example, Murray (1985, p.199) quotes the government's constitutional adviser as having said:

It is of the greatest possible importance that the public service should remain independent, that it should be under the control of someone other than those engaged in active politics.... [If] the public servants do not have a proper respect for their government

they cannot do their job well, and if they are not protected against political influence they will not be good independent advisers.

Murray observed that this doctrine had an air of unreality. With the exception of the members of the House of Assembly and the pastors, almost every adult in employment in Niue works for the government.

In similar vein, the author of the Jersey case study for the Commonwealth project observed what he called an "inevitable overlapping of political and bureaucratic activity". He continued:

This is one of the reasons why the processes of larger scale organisations cannot easily be applied in a small one. In my experience, small state politicians know -- and want to know -- a great deal about the activities of the bureaucracy, and involve themselves in the bureaucracy's decision making. Larger systems in which I have worked have been able to build 'protective' procedures which create some distance between politicians and civil servants. The nature of the society, the range of tasks to be undertaken, the narrower and to some extent sharper political focus in the small system all prevent such procedures arising.

Several other case studies also noted overlap of political and bureaucratic activity. It was indicated for example, that:

- the Minister of Education in Brunei Darussalam is also Vice-Chancellor of the university, and
- the Director of Educational Services in Maldives is also a member of parliament.

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* **The Roles of Politicians and Administrators** *

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* *Even in medium-sized and large states it is often impossible* *

* *completely to separate the roles of politicians and adminis-* *

* *trators. It is particularly difficult in small states, because* *

* *individuals have to undertake multiple functions. In the* *

* *small states with which you are familiar, can you identify* *

* *overlapping roles similar to those cited in Niue, Jersey,* *

* *Brunei Darussalam and Maldives?* *

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The Maldives case study added that heads of the divisions and specialised agencies report directly to the Minister, who is not only the political head of the Ministry but also the professional and intellectual leader. This is made possible by the absence of marked distinctions between political, civil service and professional functions.

4. Ministry Numbers and Functions

Empirical survey does show some correlation between the size of states and the numbers of ministries. However, the total number of ministries in individual states shows wide variation. Table 2 lists information from 23 small states, and shows a range from 20 in Guyana to five in Tuvalu.

Decisions on the total number of Ministries may reflect budgetary and other constraints. It is for this reason that smaller states commonly have fewer ministries. However, the number may also reflect political factors, such as a need for governments to have many ministries in order to be able to appoint many ministers. Such situations are particularly likely to arise where governments are anxious to keep a number of politicians 'on side' in coalitions.

Table 2: The Number of Ministries in Selected Commonwealth States

State	Number	State	Number
Antigua	10	Maldives	9
Bahamas	12	Malta	10
Barbados	13	Mauritius	18
Belize	10	St. Lucia	11
Botswana	10	St. Vincent	7
Brunei Darussalam	12	Seychelles	9
Dominica	6	Solomon Islands	15
Fiji	16	Swaziland	11
The Gambia	13	Tonga	9
Guyana	20	Tuvalu	5
Jersey	16	Vanuatu	14
Kiribati	10		

Source: Sutton (1987), pp.11-12; Commonwealth Secretariat survey (1989).

States with small numbers of ministries generally combine roles and make individual ministries multi-functional. Chapter 3 will provide specific information on the functions with which education has been combined in a sample of Commonwealth states. Some group education not only with such closely-related functions as culture and sports but also with such less closely-related functions as health and postal services. It is not suggested that multi-functional ministries are not also found in medium-sized and large states; but they do seem to be more common in small states.

It might be assumed that in multi-functional ministries, it is possible to achieve greater linkages and integration between the different functions. Analysis of specific ministries indicates that this is achieved to some extent. For example, the coverage in Montserrat of education, health and community services in a single ministry:

- permits the Permanent Secretary to switch funds between votes when different priorities arise;
- assists the operation of the Red Cross school for the handicapped, in which two staff are on the Education establishment but the rest are employed by Health; and
- allows donations of sports equipment coming through the Community Services wing to be easily used in the schools.

However these do not seem particularly dramatic examples, and it appears that many multi-functional ministries in small states fail to make use of the special opportunities open to them. Thus although in a larger country the Ministry of Education might be an entity on its own, its Permanent Secretary might still have as much flexibility in switching funds between votes as is the case in Montserrat. Likewise, Ministries of Education in larger countries seem able to liaise with their counterparts in Health over institutions like the Red Cross school just as easily as in Montserrat, and schools in larger countries would seem to be just as likely to get hold of sports equipment as in Montserrat. In practice, most officers below the Permanent Secretary in the Montserrat Ministry of Education, Health and Community Services appear to operate in their own wings with little more communication between them than there is between that ministry and the Ministry of Agriculture, for example.

Similar comments are applicable to many other small states with multi-functional ministries. The staff of these ministries do not always take advantage of the extra opportunities open to them. In many contexts this deserves specific analysis by senior administrators.

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* **Multiple Ministerial Responsibilities** *
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* *It is not uncommon for individual ministers to have responsibility for more than one ministry. An extreme example is found in Niue (population 3,000), where the constitution limits the total number of ministers (including the Premier) to four. In 1989 the distribution of responsibilities among these four individuals was:* *
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* 1. *The Premier and Minister for Economic Affairs, Public Services and Police;* *
* 2. *Minister of Finance, Agriculture and Fisheries;* *
* 3. *Minister of Education, Community Affairs and Health;* *
* 4. *Minister of Works, Administrative Services, Posts and Telecommunications.* *
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5. Centralisation and Decentralisation

Many small states are compact and have good systems of internal communications. In such countries as Brunei Darussalam, Barbados and Jersey there is little pressure for territorial decentralisation through regional offices. This simplifies the tasks of administration.

However, some small states cannot escape the same types of pressure for decentralisation also found in larger states. Solomon Islands, for example, is an archipelago composed of many islands scattered over a vast area. Despite the fact that Solomon Islands has only 304,000 people, geographic and political factors have required creation of seven provincial governments. Responsibility for education is therefore divided between the national government on the one hand, and the seven provincial governments plus the capital's Town Council on the other hand.

Solomon Islands is perhaps an extreme case. But survey of other small states shows many forms of decentralisation which must be taken into account in the design of administrative structures. For example:

- Compared to its West African neighbours, The Gambia has a very small land area. However the country is long and narrow, stretching 400 kilometres up the Gambia River. Much adminis-

tration of education in The Gambia is decentralised to four regional offices.

- St. Lucia is geographically much smaller than The Gambia, and has much better internal communications. St. Lucia comprises a single island, which is just 43 kilometres long and 22 kilometres wide, but the government has felt it necessary to create eight Regional Councils. The Ministry of Education & Culture has had to fit into a broad decentralisation plan, and to appoint District Education Officers to each region.
- The Republic of Malta has two main islands, Malta and Gozo. Although communications are good and distances are small, the inhabitants of Gozo have a strong identity. The Ministry of Education has to maintain a separate office in Gozo, and gives that office a significant degree of autonomy.
- Botswana has a population of only 1,164,000. However, the country occupies a vast land area in southern Africa. For effective administration it has been necessary to establish a strong network of district and sub-district governments. Officers at the local level play a key role in the administration of primary and secondary schools.

This list could easily be extended with other examples. The main point is that states with small populations do not necessarily escape the pressures for decentralisation and the need to operate sub-national governments. This may impose a burden on manpower and financial resources which is proportionately much heavier than that carried in larger states.

6. Summary

Many of the models for public administration in small states were inherited from, and originally designed for, much larger states. This is not necessarily a problem in all aspects, but it is clear that some adaptations need to be made. Some would argue, e.g. in the Caribbean, that basic structural reform is required in government. It is felt in many cases that structures do not adequately match major strategic objectives.

Secondly, the chapter noted the tendency for government as a whole to be much more dominant in small than in medium-sized and large states. Certain functions have to be carried out whether the state is large or small; and in the smallest of the small, very high percentages of the labour force work for the government either directly or indirectly. However, the chapter did also note considerable variation among both

small and larger countries.

The third section in this chapter built on this observation about multi-functional roles. It observed that in all states it is difficult completely to separate the roles of politicians and senior administrators, but stressed that it is especially difficult in small states. Again, this is not necessarily bad. Combination of roles makes use of scarce talents and other resources, and can lead to desirable forms of integration.

The fourth section also noted wide variation, this time in the total number of ministries in small states. Decisions on the total number of ministries may reflect budgetary and other resource constraints, but they also reflect political factors. Nevertheless it was pointed out that the smallest of the small do have fewer ministries, and that individual ministries are more likely to be multi-functional.

Finally, the chapter has pointed out that although many small states are compact and experience little pressure for territorial decentralisation through regional offices, others are subjected to the same types of pressure as larger states. In small states the burden of operating regional offices is proportionately much greater than in medium-sized and large states.

Further Reading

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