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# MINISTERS AND TOP OFFICIALS IN THE DUTCH CORE EXECUTIVE: LIVING TOGETHER, GROWING APART?

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This paper reports the results of a comprehensive, qualitative (100 interviews; 9 interactive workshops) study among Dutch ministers and top departmental officials. Its key question is how both groups conceive of their respective roles and working relationships. This question became a high-profile issue in the late 1990s after a series of overt clashes between senior political and bureaucratic executives. To what extent does the old, Weberian set of norms and expectations concerning the interaction between politics and bureaucracy still govern the theories and interaction patterns in use among ministers and top officials within the core executive? What new role conceptions are in evidence, and how can we explain their occurrence and diffusion in the Dutch core executive?

## INTRODUCTION

This study was triggered by a series of intense and highly public confrontations between ministers and senior civil servants that took place in The Netherlands throughout the 1990s. Each incident led to intense media and parliamentary scrutiny, and provoked debate about the viability of the traditional norms and codes governing the relationships between 'politics' and 'bureaucracy'. There was concern that the relatively limited number of high-profile cases reported constituted just the tip of the iceberg. Some commentators discerned a dangerous trend towards a bureaucratic autonomy if not hegemony *vis à vis* its democratically elected masters. Others

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blamed the spate of confrontations on exaggerated ministerial zeal in (re)asserting the 'primacy' of politics at the expense of bureaucratic professionalism. The two camps agreed, however, that the incidents were indicative of an erosion of the traditional *modus vivendi* between politics and bureaucracy.

At the outset of this study it was impossible to confirm or deny the accuracy of these interpretations of developments in the Dutch core executive. Apart from some incidental case studies and *ad hoc* mini-surveys, the most recent systematic research effort on the topic dated back to the beginning of the 1980s. At this time The Netherlands – along with Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and the US – was part of a comparative study undertaken by Aberbach *et al*. (1981) on the attitudes, values and patterns of behaviour of governmental elites in Western democracies. In short, there was no scientific basis to put the issue into perspective that was comparable to the efforts in the UK and other Anglo-Saxon countries (Campbell and Wilson 1995; Rhodes and Dunleavy 1995; Peters *et al*. 2000; Rhodes and Weller 2001) or Scandinavian countries (Lægreid 2001; Lægreid *et al*. 2001; Lægreid and Christensen 2003; Gregory and Grønnegård Christensen 2004; Grønnegård Christensen 2004).

The goal of this study was to fill part of this gap. Our main aim was to obtain insight, first, into the role conceptions ('theories in use') of ministers and top departmental officials, and, second, into their characterizations of the key factors governing their interrelationships. A qualitative, interpretive research strategy was chosen, mainly because of the complexity and subtlety of the considerations, tactics and interaction patterns that were to be studied. In the period between Autumn 1999 and Summer 2001, 100 in-depth interviews were conducted with (former and current) ministers and deputy ministers; and (former and current) top civil servants. The interviews averaged about 1 hour in length; all interviews were recorded and transcribed. An undertaking was given to respondents that neither they nor their department would be identified in the study. In addition, a series of interactive workshops was held where departmental officials were asked to deal with (reality-based) hypothetical conflicts and dilemmas involving serving and interacting with ministers and parliament. During these workshops, selected groups of both top-level and middle-management officials in two ministries were presented with anonymized cases provided by a group of high-level civil servants, scholars of public administration, and former cabinet ministers. The case providers had been asked to focus on situations which present civil servants with political/professional dilemmas in their relations with their ministers (as balanced against those with their peers, their organizational constituency, parliament, interest groups, and the mass media). Discussion about the cases proceeded in a 'Socratic' manner. As was done during the interviews, every effort was made in the process to create a 'safe' setting to minimize the likelihood of defensive and socially desirable behaviour. Confidential and anonymized

 

notes were taken during the discussions and these were later elaborated in meeting protocols. This procedure yielded rich information about the mental maps, normative frameworks and practical reasoning of the officials in question. Moreover, comparison of how different individuals and groups (drawn from different sections of ministries) dealt with the same set of dilemmas also gave an insight in the characteristics of departmental (sub)culture(s). Since the latter does not concern us in this article, these will not be reported here.

A concerted effort was made to be granted access to directly observe ministers and top officials at work. After a year of protracted negotiations, however, this idea was aborted; the method was apparently regarded as too intrusive and 'dangerous'; in addition, we felt that too many constraints would be put on our freedom to publish the findings. After the publication of a book (in Dutch) reporting our initial results in the summer of 2002, the senior author conducted some 35 further lectures and workshops throughout the Dutch government and these provided another, if somewhat less systematically organized, set of occasions to test and refine the findings and interpretations reported below. The study was part of a larger project that sought to document the dynamics of political-administrative relations in The Netherlands. The research design – with its data gathering emphasis on a large number of elite interviews and secondary reliance on interactive workshops – was focused on creating a 'generic' picture of the Dutch core executive. Selection of ministries and respondents was tailored accordingly, although we refrained from formal sampling techniques, partly because the secretaries-general of some ministries were not eager to have a large number of their top civil servants scrutinized and interviewed. In the end, we interviewed approximately 22–25 individuals each from 3 ministries (Home Office, Education, Health), and another 25–30 chosen randomly from the remaining 9 ministries and used as a checking procedure. The interactive workshops were held in two ministries that must remain anonymous. The lectures and workshops held after the publication of the book cut right across the core executive and went from middle management to cabinet level.

First, we briefly review relevant typologies of political-bureaucratic roles and relations against which we can describe the Dutch case. Next we outline and report key features of that case as we observed it and demonstrate that most Dutch ministers and department officials no longer perceive their working relationship exclusively from a classic hierarchical Weberian point of view, nor as a blurred 'hybrid' (Aberbach *et al*. 1981) nor a clubbish form of sectoral 'village life' (Peters 1987). They perceive it more in terms of a pragmatic-professional transaction between office-holders with (potentially) complementary contributions to successful policy-making. We conclude this paper by reviewing some explanations for the development of Dutch political-administrative relations in the last decade and by placing the Dutch case in a broader comparative context.

## BUREAUCRATS AND POLITICIANS: WAYS OF LIVING APART TOGETHER

In the traditional understanding of the relationship between bureaucrats and politicians – the literature goes back to Weber's early twentieth century model of bureaucracy and to Woodrow Wilson in the American context – there is a clear distinction and hierarchy of labour between politicians and bureaucrats. The politician functions as a sovereign representative of political values and interests. The bureaucrat is the subordinate 'expert advisor and policy executor', whose major concern is efficiency. This classical dichotomy has long been challenged. Several studies have suggested that in reality the respective role conceptions and interaction patterns between politicians and administrators are more differentiated (Putnam 1975). First, Aberbach *et al*. (1981) pointed to a growing involvement of civil servants in what had traditionally been described as 'political' roles. Of their famous four images to describe the relationship between politicians and administrators, image IV (the complete blurring of roles) seemed to be becoming the face of the future when they conducted their interviews.

Secondly, Peters (1987) deduced five ideal-typical modes of interaction on a continuum between, on the one hand, formal Weberian separation and hierarchy and, on the other hand, 'bureaucratic government', in which bureaucratic expertise and activism dominate the policy process and the role of political officeholders is marginal. In between both ends of the continuum there are the intermediate categories of 'village life', 'functional village life' and 'adversarial politics'. The notion of 'adversarial politics' refers to a strongly politicized relationship in which politicians and bureaucrats compete for control over public policy. This is exactly the scenario that many observers in The Netherlands feared in the wake of the various confrontations that took place in the 1990s. In fact, Peters and Pierre (2001) argue that public sector reform and administrative reorganization have had a profound effect on the relationship between politicians and administrators. Agencification and the changing recruitment and career patterns of officials tend to undermine both the classical dichotomy and the more cooperative 'village life' in which jointly socialized politicians and top officials blend smoothly. Moreover, the NPM-driven emphasis on performance and measurable outcomes rather than procedural correctness and hierarchical compliance may, paradoxically, have lessened the capacity of politicians to control bureaucrats and created more conflict between them.

Thirdly, Svara (2001) offers an alternative framework for interpreting contemporary political-administrative relationships. His key notion is one of complementarity, based on the presumption that politicians and administrators are highly dependent upon each other for getting their respective jobs done. He discerns two dimensions: political control and professional independence. The control dimension refers to the capacity of politicians to set directions and maintain oversight, while the independence dimension

 

focuses on the opportunities bureaucratic professionals have to assert their perspectives in policy formulation and to adhere to their professional standards in implementation. This results in four possible combinations (see table 1, below).

The table suggests that a high level of political control may actually co-exist with a high level of professional independence. Svara calls this a state of complementarity: although sometimes politicians and bureaucrats perform functions that necessarily overlap, they maintain distinct roles based on their unique perspectives and values and the differences in their formal positions. In the complementarity box, these distinct roles come together in a mutually supportive way. In contrast to the many authors concerned with bureaucratic power, Svara argues that most current interactions among officials resemble the win-win situation of complementarity (see also Mouritzen and Svara 2002).

These various typologies provided the starting point for our analysis of Dutch political-administrative relations. Like the aforementioned scholars, we focused on both the role conceptions of ministers and top officials, and their day-to-day interactions. We now report our main findings.

## THE NEGOTIATED ORDER OF THE DUTCH CORE EXECUTIVE

### Historical and institutional context

First, we need to outline the context of political-administrative relations in The Netherlands. The Netherlands is usually described as a consociational or consensual democracy (Lijphart 1999; Andeweg and Irwin 2002). Political life has long been organized around Catholic, Protestant and Socialist pillars. Although the pillars have eroded to a large extent, the predominance of elites, compromise and cooperation are still the chief characteristics of the political culture (Toonen and Hendriks 2001).

In the Dutch proportional electoral system, voters do not decide who will govern (there is no single executive position up for election); nor do they decide which election manifesto will become the government programme. Only the MPs are elected. Although political parties usually express their

TABLE 1 *Variations in the interaction between politicians and administrators*

| | | **Elected officials: degree of control** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | ***High*** | ***Low*** |
| **Administrators: level of independence** | ***Low*** | Political dominance | Stalemate or ***laissez-faire*** |
| | ***High*** | Complementarity | Bureaucratic autonomy |

*Source*: adapted from J.H. Svara. 2001. 'The Myth of the Dichotomy: Complementarity of Politics and Public Administration in the Past and Future of Public Administration', *Public Administration Review*, 61, 2, 176–83, with kind permission of the author and Blackwell Publishing.

coalition preferences during the campaign, election outcomes tend to leave various coalition options open. The all-important cabinet formation that then takes place tends to be both time-consuming and non-transparent, as well as unpredictable. The resulting coalition agreements serve increasingly as the starting point for 'management contracts' between ministers and departmental top-officials to deliver the policies agreed upon by the political parties in the coalition agreement (Timmermans and Andeweg 2000).

Practically all cabinet ministers head a department. There is no fixed size for the cabinet, but it usually includes about 14 to 16 ministers as well 14 to 16 junior ministers ('staatssecretarissen'). Departments are staffed completely by career civil servants. There are no party political appointments or ministerial cabinets. Some ministers take a political adviser along to their department. The advisers operate mainly as political and public relations officers for the minister.

Ministers – including the prime minister – thus have no institutional source of policy advice and support other than their departmental officials and the government 'think tanks' embedded within the departments. The coalition nature of Dutch politics constrains the emergence of ministerial cabinets. The political summit of the Dutch ministries consists of two, at most three, political office-holders, usually members of different coalition parties. Homogeneous ministerial cabinets are therefore difficult to achieve. The idea of the loyal, politically neutral civil servant recruited on the basis of Weberian 'merits' criteria is an entrenched norm. This system has constrained the appointment of political affiliates of the minister at the departments (Van der Meer 2004).

In relative terms, the scope and depth of public sector reform in The Netherlands has been limited (Kickert 1997; Toonen 2001). Other than the 1995 creation of the ABD (the Directorate for the Senior Public Service; see also below), marginal changes to civil service statutes, and some mostly short-lived experiments with collegial management (Kickert 2002), there has been no major overhaul or reform of the formal structure of ministries. Changes in The Netherlands have been incremental rather than sweeping, and more cultural than structural. Nevertheless, the rules of the game have changed. The question is: to what extent and in what way have these changes affected the political-bureaucratic roles and relationships?

We confine the following account of 'life at the top' in the Dutch core executive to one of the three political-bureaucratic regimes in the core executive, that is, the relations between ministers and their chief departmental advisers. First we focus on the two parties' accounts of their respective role conceptions. We continue by describing what they see as the key factors shaping their day-to-day interrelationships. The analysis of the data set focused on detecting the common denominators and was less geared towards a systematic comparison of departmental/sectoral differences. However, although the ministries where we had a rich empirical base had their own organizational problematique and momentum as regards

 

political-administrative relations, in general the variations in role conceptions and interaction experiences of the office-holders did not seem to differ systematically along departmental lines. Other Dutch scholars have reported more systematically on departmental subcultures and sectoral peculiarities within the Dutch core executive, but they have been preoccupied more with issues of organization and policy, and have not focused so much on political and bureaucratic roles and relations (see, for example, Bekke *et al*. 1993; Veenswijk 1994; Hakvoort and Veenswijk 2002; Bekke and de Vries 2003; Kickert 2003; Yesilkagit 2004).

**Civil servants' conceptions of 'good' and 'bad' ministers**

Civil servants expect their ministers to display effective political leadership inside as well as outside the department. Yet what does that mean? How do civil service interviewees perceive the minister's role? How do they discriminate between successful and failing political masters? To organize the accounts we present, we use Marsh *et al*.'s (2000) classification of four generic, interrelated roles which ministers need to perform: (1) a policy role; (2) a political role; (3) a managerial role; and (4) a public relations role. The policy-making and the managerial roles are more department-centred; the political and the public relations roles are focused on the department environment.

*Developing policies and internal leadership*

The policy role of a minister relates to the capacity to articulate political preferences and get them transformed into public policy. The first component of this craft relates to the extent to which a minister is able to set the departmental policy agenda. Is he able to initiate new policies that change the overall direction of the department? Or does he play a more passive role, selecting policy options offered to him by his advisers and other stakeholders? It has to be remembered that coalition agreements play a pivotal role in The Netherlands. When appointed, ministers commit themselves to the development of the policies agreed upon in the coalition contract. This constrains their autonomy to steer the departmental policy agenda. Yet if they stay within the limitations set by the coalition agreement and the government budget, ministers are relatively free to initiate and change departmental policies.

How ministers perform this policy role depends a great deal on their personal leadership style (see Kaarbo and Hermann 1998; Preston and 't Hart 1999). Some ministers prefer to play a strong proactive role at each stage of departmental policy development. Moreover, pressure by media or parliament can force even the most delegatory of ministers to get closely involved with the particulars of a given policy. Ministers may also have a strong personal interest in particular issues or policy subfields and be relatively indifferent to others. The performance of the policy role varies depending on the personal interest ministers take in particular issues. Ministerial 'pet

 

projects' or politically promising dossiers can count on active and sustained ministerial attention. On issues that do not attract ministerial attention, entire sections of ministries are required to operate in a protracted political void that obviously impedes progress.

One way or another, department officials respect the involvement and direction of the minister in the policy development process as long as there remains ample opportunity for departmental officials to provide their input to the process. There is professed weariness about ministers that do not listen to them, who shut them out, or who micromanage the drafting of policy papers and legislative proposals. Department officials expect their ministers to make good use of the professional expertise available within the department. Ministers whose policy positions are completely fixed before listening to departmental advice make their officials feel redundant. Alternatively, ministers that fail to provide clear direction to their bureaucracies create a leadership vacuum. In such cases, officials complain that they do not know what their minister wants. Some knowledge of the policy substance is seen as a *sine qua non* for effective political direction, as well as for legitimating the policy publicly. Well-informed ministers are astute customers of civil service advice and well capable of 'sparring' in departmental policy discussions.

***The 'vision thing' and 'capacity to deliver'***

Almost all departmental officials claimed that the two key characteristics they want in the political role of a minister are a clear set of political preferences and political efficacy. Departmental officials expect from their ministers a clear and articulated vision about what they intend to accomplish during their tenure, and explicit choices on what to prioritize. Ministers who, for whatever reason, lack these qualities, will preside over a department that possesses fragmented attention, its energy scattered over too many topics and policy areas.

Effective political control requires more from political officeholders than providing direction to the officials at the department. Ministers must also interact successfully with actors outside the department: their colleagues, the prime minister, MPs, their own political party and key interest groups. In these encounters and arenas political craftsmanship is one of the crucial assets a minister can bring to a department. The officials may design and develop wonderful policy proposals, but they can never alone see that they become government policy since they have direct access neither to the cabinet nor to the legislative and mass media arenas. They need a strong minister for that. The political judgement and parliamentary experience of a minister are viewed as key assets. Several interviewees referred to 'good' ministers as being successful 'prize fighters': able to defend the department's policies in political struggles over policy (and budgets). It is in their interest to build the minister up to wage these battles, with both substantive and tactical advice.

 

*Salesmanship*

All interviewees felt that media impact on ministers has risen over the years. As a result, the public relations role of ministers is much more important than it used to be. Selling policies via the mass media is now a direct extension of the political role of ministers. This has resulted in an increasing emphasis on policy 'presentation'. Ministers are more and more keen to invoke help from communication professionals, 'spin doctors' and departmental press officers to develop media and communication strategies, to the dismay of some of the more 'content-driven' top officials we interviewed. These PR-professionals can aid and abet policy selling, but at the end of the day it is up to ministers to legitimize policy and nourish the 'corporate image' of the department. Ministers are often placed in a situation (something happens and there is a call for a response) where they need to react to sudden queries from media or parliament. Their capacity to improvise in their public performance is judged to be crucial in upholding the department's communication strategies.

*Running the departmental machine*

Interviewees largely agree that ministers should not exert themselves in managing the departmental organization. In The Netherlands, ministerial abstinence from organizational and staffing issues is a well-entrenched norm among civil servants. Such matters are left to the secretary-general of the ministry. Several ministers nevertheless take a strong interest in senior-level appointments in their ministries. Some have actively encouraged a number of their top officials to 'move on' in ABD's interdepartmental pool of senior civil service officials, seeking to fill open slots with candidates of their choosing – sometimes, but not necessarily, along party lines. Asking officials to leave is most likely to occur when incoming coalitions and ministers pursue a reform agenda. Since they are new to executive power, they may be uncomfortable inheriting the civil service teams composed by the very predecessors whose policies they intend to dismantle to what they were before. There is debate about whether there is a robust tendency for increased ministerial influence on personnel decisions, and whether it boils down to a creeping politicization of the Dutch civil service similar to the 'erosion of Whitehall' depicted by some observers of the British scene (Campbell and Wilson 1995; Kavanagh and Seldon 1999) and a 'party politicization of the administrative elite' reported for Germany (Derlien 2003). Yet it is clear that the arrival on the scene of the ABD has provided an institutional mechanism for resolving issues of *incomptabilité des humeurs* or lack of ministerial confidence in a top official in an elegant way by couching forced departures in the uncontroversial language of management development.

**Ministerial conceptions of 'good' and 'bad' civil servants**

Dutch top departmental officials agree that ministers add value to the political-bureaucratic relationship when they possess competences that

these bureaucrats see as essential for effective political management of public policy-making. The question now is what these officials themselves are expected to bring to the equation. As we shall see, cabinet ministers expect civil servants to serve them in a 'responsive' way, acting effectively and loyally to enhance the government's (and their minister's individual) political agenda.

*Effective policy advice and programme delivery*

Providing solid and timely advice to political office holders is perceived as the pre-eminent essential element of the professional skills and competences of department officials. New ministers seek the assistance of department officials to familiarize themselves with the policy areas within their portfolio: their history, critical challenges, main forums and players, 'hot' policy options, the realities of implementation, and the political opportunities and risks embedded in all of this. Both the expertise and experience of civil servants are pivotal here: they should know their business. When interviewed on this issue, departmental officials considered themselves extremely capable as regards both knowledge of policy substance and 'feel' for the politics of policy-making; the ministers, on the contrary, were much less unanimous and forceful in their assessment on their departmental staff, particularly on the latter point of political sensitivity.

Secondly, in adopting policies, politicians make public promises, but it is up to their senior civil servants to see that they are implemented and to deliver the intended outcomes. Ministers depend on their department officials for these qualities to an even larger extent than on their advisory capacities. The minister can seek sources of advice outside the bureaucracy, but he can never develop his own shadow bureaucracy for delivery in public services. Top managers who lead executive agencies are therefore primarily evaluated by their ministers in terms of their 'capacity to deliver' tangible results. The ministers and officials in our sample overwhelmingly agreed that the emphasis in the parliamentary and public arena has been moving gradually towards implementation and service delivery issues. In fact most major parliamentary inquiries and the most critical National Court of Audit reports in the last decade have dealt with implementation failures, and with the overproduction of new policies, something that tends to debilitate effective implementation. Paradoxically perhaps, these reports suggest that the NPM-emphasis on results-oriented government and agencification has at the same time limited ministerial and departmental authority over matters of implementation and service delivery (see Peters and Pierre 2001; Hood and Peters 2004). In The Netherlands, this combination of increased political salience and the decreased opportunities for political control of the implementation process has been a major source of friction: between ministers and their civil servants, but also within the bureaucratic domain itself, that is, in principal-agent struggles between core departments and executive agencies. Traces of this phenomenon can also be found in the UK

 

(James 2003) and in Scandinavia (Christensen and Lægreid 2003a). The more politicized an issue area, and the more problematic street-level service delivery turns out to be, the more likely that principal-agent tensions, including those between ministers and executive agency heads, will arise. This is irrespective of the chosen implementation structure: in-house departmental implementation or 'arm's-length' agency implementation.

The main question is how political direction of policy implementation is to be constituted, particularly in politically sensitive cases. There is a dilemma here. When political officeholders try to turn back the agencification trend and reassert control of the agencies as if they were an integral part of their departments – as recommended to the Dutch government by a blue-ribbon advisory commission in the Spring of 2004 – they risk getting bogged down in exhausting and debilitating micromanagement (Werkgroep Verzelfstandigde Organisaties 2004). On the others hand, if ministers continue to adhere to the distinction between 'politics' and 'administration', are they really willing to grant autonomy to the implementation agencies, and to defend them even when there are service-delivery problems for which they – and not these agencies – are held accountable by parliament?

### *Political antennas*

An essential element that ministers feel departmental officials need to possess is political sensitivity. Most ministers reported that they were not interested in policy plans that ignore the political implications of the proposals made. Civil servants could only be useful advisers when they were able to indicate when and how issues and policies might develop into major political problems. Issues and policies might equally develop into opportunities, although this was something that was heard much less frequently during the interviews. Searching for problems prevails over 'opportunity seeking' in scanning the political environment (Cyert and March 1963). This implies that ministers expect officials to correctly anticipate the political ramifications of any given issue and policy proposal. This in turn requires insight in the political environment and a grasp of how political issues are constructed both in the media and in parliament.

Several ministers complained about the strong focus of many civil servants on policy substance and organizational matters. Many officials, they argued, still perceive policy-making as a process that is, or should be, driven by professional, near-academic, thinking, removed from the 'hurry and strife' of politics. As ministers, however, they expect advice which includes information about the political support and opposition that proposals are likely to generate, the 'package deals' that can be made with various stakeholders, and so on. At the same time this form of political advice must be given discreetly. Ministers disapprove of situations where top officials entertain autonomous political contacts with MPs, journalists and other political actors. They consider this area to be their own territory.

 

One minister was particularly blunt. When on his first appearance at the ministry he baffled his secretary-general by saying: 'I shall handle the politics around here. You find something else to do' (quoted in Van Thijn and Cardoso-Ribeiro 2004). Ministers thus send mixed signals to their officials. The 'good political sense' they require them to possess forces officials into a delicate balancing act between getting to know enough about the political game to meet the minister's needs on the one hand, and not getting too politically visible or involved on the other. Moreover, ministers vary in the degree to which they have the courage and ability to absorb political blame over what may have been departmental errors in information provision. Civil servants, particularly when labouring under opportunistic and/or politically weak ministers, are therefore likely to 'play it safe' and send 'everything' up the hierarchy so that both the top officials and the minister end up floating in a sea of reports and memos whose relative relevance they can hardly begin to establish.

***Loyalty***

The classic Weberian norm of bureaucratic loyalty is alive and well in The Netherlands – both on ministers' wish lists and in department officials' own role conceptions. The norm translates into a widely shared conviction that departmental officials should adhere to a civil service ethic of serving any minister and working with equal vigour for any government, irrespective of its political identity. Partisan views or personal preferences of civil servants should not be allowed to interfere with their job performance. In this domain most interviewees on both sides appeared to support the classical image of the political-bureaucratic relationship: politicians take the decisions and civil servants prepare and execute them. Civil servants are allowed, even expected, to argue strongly with their minister in the policy preparation process, but in case of lasting disagreement, officials are expected to comply with the directives of the minister. Socially desirable behaviour in the interview situation can, we feel, never account for the uniformity and determination with which this position was held (that in the end it is the minister who rules). A comparable study on political-administrative relations in The Netherlands reported similar findings (Nieuwenkamp 2001).

Yet, for all this agreement on the basic norm, the interviews with civil servants also showed that in practice bureaucratic loyalty is not adhered to unconditionally, but is in fact contingent upon a minister's behaviour in office. As previously noted, when officials feel they are repeatedly treated unfairly or when the political officeholder is considered persistently incompetent (that is, low political efficacy in cabinet, parliament and media arenas, and lack of 'spine' in the face of strain and criticism), civil servants become more guarded, more calculating and more passive. It is under these circumstances that conflicts between ministers and officials are most likely to occur and to escalate.

 

A sensitive component of the loyalty dimension is the extent to which officials are allowed to use 'voice', that is, to express concern or dissatisfaction with departmental policies (Bovens 1998). Interviewees drew a sharp distinction between the 'internal' and 'external' voice. Some ministers self-consciously organize their own internal 'opposition' by arranging brainstorming meetings at the department, taking pains to create a 'safe' setting for officials to express unconventional ideas and objections against ministerial policy plans. In such settings, the bureaucratic voice is evaluated positively ('loyalty that talks back' or 'speaking truth to power', and so on). Having said that, many interviewees admitted that ministers often succumb to the temptation of 'organizing voice out' (i.e. asking only like-minded people to give advice) during the deliberations, instead of embracing and rewarding contrasting or conflicting opinions (see Jackall 1988; 't Hart 1994).

External voice – civil servants who give opinionated interviews in the media or other external forums without ministerial knowledge and (implicit) permission – is a much more restricted option. Some of the more candid ministers admitted that it is considered acceptable for civil servants to 'leak' information, but only on *their* instructions. Three widely shared rules of thumb concerning the use of external voice by civil servants can be distilled from the interviews. First, the closer an official is to the heart of the policy-making process, the less freedom he or she possesses to air their opinions in public. Second, the more a policy reaches the stage of political decision making, the less desirable 'external voice' is considered to be. Third, officials and political officeholders should never surprise one another with their public statements. They should announce what they are going to say to whom and where. Officials who offend these unwritten rules tend to send their ministers into a state of frenzy, and risk gravely compromising their own position.

**'Good' and 'bad' relationships in day-to-day interaction**

Ministers and department officials overwhelmingly emphasized the cooperative character of their interaction. The interviews were held in order to uncover the norms and codes guiding the behaviour of both groups. The risk of questioning role expectations is, however, that they may produce socially desirable answers. To reduce these effects we asked respondents during the interviews to report about the behaviour and image of their counterparts rather than to describe their own role (expectation). In addition, all respondents were assured that they would not be personally identified with any quotations.

The contemporary Dutch core executive is a set of negotiated orders rather than classical hierarchies. Civil servants' theories in use are determined by professional norms in implementation and management, and they expect the same of their political officeholders. The attitudes of civil servants are not only shaped by the classical norm of loyalty, but at least as much by the answer to the question: what does this minister 'do' for the department?

Ministers should manifest themselves inside and outside the department as effective political leaders. Their authority is not accepted automatically, and acceptance of it never becomes unconditional. New ministers do always receive the benefit of the civil servants' doubt, but when they turn out not to 'deliver', their authority 'evaporates'. The officials will then switch to 'risk reduction' and 'damage control' mode. In those and other cases of suboptimal 'fit' between politicians and bureaucrats, the negotiated order of political-administrative relations tends to give way to the politics of survival. This type of bureaucratic politics is neither overt nor blunt but rather subtle and implicit. It evolves around the art of omission, 'shirking', slowing down, 'ducking', information manipulation, and blame avoidance. In short: when mutual trust and respect have eroded, organized hypocrisy (Brunsson 1989) becomes part and parcel of political-administrative interactions.

***Mutuality, reciprocity and 'chemistry'***

However tenuous they might be in practice, the normative language used today to describe the desired interaction between politicians and bureaucrats is characterized by notions such as 'teamwork' and 'complementarity'. Crucial in the negotiated order of ministers and top -officials is held to be the amount of mutual trust and mutual loyalty. Mutual trust refers to the confidence ministers and officials have in each other's competence, confidentiality, openness and honesty; and mutual loyalty to how committed ministers and officials are to another in a reciprocal way. There must be an underlying certainty about the 'bottom lines' that apply in the interaction: departmental officials comply with the directives of the minister and the minister defends the officials when the need arises. Politicians and bureaucrats need to be sure that they can count on one another, even if 'the going gets tough'. This means that they do not criticize each other in public (behind closed doors, however, their interaction needs to be frank and open, that is, all but hypocritical). Mutual trust is an essential element, according to the interviewees, for a productive relationship.

This is particularly so for those dyads which engage in highly frequent interaction. Personal chemistry lowers the transaction costs in the interaction between politicians and bureaucrats. Ministers and top officials do not need to like each other, but it certainly helps. Top civil servants do their best to serve their ministers professionally. They are willing to adapt a great deal to the preferences and style of leadership of the minister, but they cannot fully efface their own personality and style; after all, they are expected to be leaders in their own right. Inevitably, some political-bureaucratic dyads work better than others in this regard; when they fail, it is usually the official and not the minister that goes – unless the disgruntled official decides to 'outwait' the minister. This classic bureaucratic option, however, has become less viable now that frequent rotation of senior civil servants has become institutionalized in the Dutch civil service. It should be noted here that in recent years sustained efforts have been made to break the hold of

 

departmental 'parochialism' and interdepartmental rivalry in Dutch civil service culture. Since the late 1990s, all senior-level departmental and inspectorate jobs have been joined in an interdepartmental pool, administered by the Directorate for the Senior Public Service (ABD), embedded in the Dutch Home Office. As part of this pool, frequent job rotation and an emphasis on generalist *managerial* skills are encouraged and institutionalized. By all accounts, these objectives have been achieved; the former so much so that some observers have bemoaned the alleged losses of expertise, organizational memory and continuity that have been brought about by this 'job carousel'.

***Communication patterns***

Ministers cannot provide effective political direction if they do not clearly communicate their policy objectives and their priorities to their department officials. Civil servants cannot be responsive if they do not know the political preferences of their ministers. Communication that is either distorted or reduced impairs the efficacy of the relationship. Yet the world is now characterized by the overproduction of information. At the same time, significant, yet unpredictable, political risks exist for ministers – as well as civil servants – associated with information exchange. Whether giving or withholding particular bits of information from parliament, selecting what to tell a minister or gauging an optimal communication practice at the top of ministries, it constitutes a delicate craft for top civil servants. Few interviewees disagreed with the point that frequent interaction between minister and department officials that was based on clear and explicit mutual expectations about content, style and format usually resulted in a better understanding of the preferences of the ministers. Such communication provides officials with good opportunities to 'get to know the mind' of their minister and, if necessary, to anticipate it effectively when the need arises.

In practice, however, the communication process between ministers and their departments is highly contingent upon each minister's preference and style as well as on the specific mode of institutionalization of the departmental 'paper flow' in various ministries. Institutionally, there is no uniformity in the *modus operandi* of departmental communication. Some departments have a strong secretary-general's office that centralizes and scrutinizes the information flow to the top, whereas in others the various policy directorates and staff units manage their own upward channels directly. The personal preferences of ministers is also something that varies. Some are avid readers, some anything but: this fact requires ministries to tailor their written communications accordingly. When there are frequent ministerial turnovers in a particular department, this constant adjustment of paper production logics is quite demanding. It may take months before all corners of the department 'get' it. In terms of face to face interaction, some ministers only want to see the proverbial 'top five' in the ministry and thus risk becoming 'captured' by too limited a set of bureaucratic players. Others

 

enter office wanting to 'reach out' down to the junior adviser level as much as possible, often, facilitated by the Intranet, deliberately attempting to bypass the departmental hierarchy altogether. This brings with it the risk of upsetting bureaucratic standard operating procedures and creating confusion about what the minister knows and wants within the organization. Our impression is that both these extreme strategies are bound to fail, and that at the end of a government's tenure, most ministers' departmental communication routines will have gravitated towards a mean in which ministers most frequently consult the 2 top levels in the ministry (secretaries-general and directors-general), and interact with other civil servants, particularly directors, more or less frequently depending on a particular issue's salience.

In our study we also noted an almost complete absence of what might be called 'proactive meta-communication'. When ministers enter office, often after protracted coalition negotiations during which departmental policy planning gets log-jammed because of the prevailing political vacuum, there is a tendency to 'get down to business' as soon as possible – with 'business' meaning the substantive issues of the day as spelled out in the often thick 'transition dossiers' prepared by the department for the new political masters. Very little time and effort tends to be spend by both parties on *how* the minister wants to be advised; this is something that is to be 'found out' by the department as they go along. In practice this means that ministers have to be the first to express either amazement or annoyance at departmental practices. Alternatively, major mishaps have to occur before space is created to talk about mutual styles and expectations. This then takes place in a climate of mutual irritation, and – if there have been political perturbations as a result – recrimination. Although there are cases where there is a good fit and strong chemistry between ministers and bureaucrats, there are also many instances where there is a chronic lack of trust and 'safety' in the dialogue between them. Incoming ministers, especially after major changes in the political composition of governments, tend to be weary of the resident bureaucrats; social-democratic ministers particularly so (a finding also reported by Nieuwenkamp 2001; see also Derlien 2003). This contributes to a climate where many civil servants find it hard to bring 'difficult' messages to ministers.

### *The temporal dimension*

Lastly, political-bureaucratic relations are highly contingent upon time factors. Firstly, it has often been argued that politicians and bureaucrats have different time frames: for politicians, it is impatience; for bureaucrats, it is endurance: 'The two groups hold different time perspectives. Politics requires quick results before the next elections whereas bureaucracy is cautious about change' (Dunn 1997, p. 20). Media attention and pressure from parliament, as well as the electoral cycle itself, offer incentives to politicians to strive for policies that result in fast and visible outcomes. Officials bemoan the fact that political officeholders are becoming completely

 

encapsulated by the demands and issues presented by the media and public opinion. Politics, they comment, has been changing into a form of permanent deadline and crisis management: ministers do not take the initiative; they react – from day to day, from issue to issue, and from scandal to scandal. Although officials perceive it as their task to point out the long-term perspective, they too are subjugated to the relentless pace of what Meyer has called the 'media democracy' (Meyer 2002). For example, when asked how he plans his working day, a secretary-general observed with a sigh of resignation that 'what I do is determined by what is in today's papers. No, let me correct that, it is determined by what we think *might be* in tomorrow's papers and news shows'.

Also, the relationship between ministers and their administrations changes within the course of a minister's tenure. Following Meltsner (1988), we distinguish four distinct stages in the political-bureaucratic relationship. In the entry stage, in the first year of the government term, ministers who enter office are usually relatively inexperienced. They have to acquaint themselves with their portfolios and articulate political priorities within it. For officials, this means that the minister is at the apprenticeship stage: he has to be educated. This has to be done with utmost delicacy: when he feels the department is patronizing or condescending towards him, this can lead to serious trouble. During the consolidation stage, ministers and officials (should) have achieved a steady working relationship and be able to collaborate on getting a policy agenda in motion. Then begins a stage where ministers are increasingly asked by their political environment to show results, a demand which they then transmit to their department. This stage is characterized by an evolution of the discourse and the interaction logic between political and bureaucratic executives; there are likely to be a few politically 'critical junctures' that can decisively strengthen or weaken trust in the relationship.

The fourth and final year is the pre-exit stage, where both parties start to anticipate the termination of tenure. If the relationship between minister and department is valued by both, top officials will work extremely hard to reap as many of political benefits (bills passed, strong budgets, new policy initiatives on the agenda) to be gained from the presence of a 'strong' minister as possible in the time that remains. This implies that officials work hard to get the work done and to present some visible results at the end of the political term. If the relationship is poor, and bureaucratic esteem for the capabilities of the incumbent minister is low, officials will – unobtrusively of course – start to 'take their foot off the gas' and slow down the development of new initiatives. They prefer the uncertainty of waiting for the next elections and a new minister over the certain political defeat that awaits their efforts if the present officeholder is to take things to cabinet and parliament. When asked about this, officials admit that this is common practice, and yet also admit that from a classic, narrow perspective on bureaucratic loyalty to political superiors, it is hard to defend. Some evoke lofty ideals – such as the

 

bureaucrat's appeal to other (professional) or higher objects of loyalty (that is, redefining 'political' in a much wider sense) – to defend their behaviour; many simply admit that this is the way the game is played.

What can we make of this picture in terms of the analytical typologies presented earlier? Both ministers and bureaucrats emphasize the cooperative character of their relationship. Initially, both types of actors talk about each having a distinct role to play, much in keeping with Aberbach *et al*.'s (1981) image I. Having said that, the interviewees also reflect a keen awareness that the active support of the other is essential for each to play his or her role well. And hence they are quick to state that civil servants should have a keen grasp of political realities, and should assist their ministers proactively in managing the political agenda that is designed to shape these political realities. Complementarity, then, does not equal 'blurring' (image IV) of roles. In our study, ministers and bureaucrats talked about one another as quite different breeds, as representatives of different worlds coming to the ministry via different routes and bringing completely different outlooks to it. We found no trace of Peters' (1987) 'village life' in that respect. On the contrary, they stress the virtues of complementarity and teamwork along the lines of Svara's (2001) model, but they use that language to refer to the *desired* rather than the *actual* state of affairs at their departments. In their interpretations of the world of political elites, Richards and Smith (2004, p. 784) raise similar observations in analysing the 'narratives' of civil servants. Following Goffman (1959), they argue that civil servants often present an idealized view of the situation. We noticed however, that, based on their daily experiences, ministers and civil servants incorporated both idealized and practical views in the descriptions of their role conceptions. This has particular resonance when analysing the interviews. The 'theories in use' contained 'discrepant' role elements from which ministers and top officials both develop their norms and narratives and that shape and condition their behaviour. Although some ministers we interviewed were keen to make us believe that there was no gap between ideal and practice, some others, as well as a (small) majority of the civil servants interviewed, dropped this initial upbeat posture during the course of the interviews. They went on to paint a picture of current practices that came much closer to the starkness of Peters' notion of 'adversarial politics' than to the clubby-ness of his 'village life' models.

## EXPLAINING THE AMBIVALENT RULES OF THE CORE EXECUTIVE GAME

We end up with an ambivalent picture. It is almost as if the Dutch core executive consists of two worlds: the world of norms and intentions, and the world of observed behaviour. The first world is one of collaboration, horizontalism and professionalism. More than ever before, the rhetoric of contemporary interaction between Dutch politicians and bureaucrats is characterized by the notion of teamwork, suggesting that the dominant

 

normative model has become that of complementarity rather than hierarchy. Each party to the political-bureaucratic relationship depends on the other and our study suggests that – at least when asked directly – they seem to have become aware of this. Most interviewees intuitively understood that when the political-administrative relationships at the top are deemed to be good, they produce an ambiance, both internally and externally, that allows for more successful policy-making at large. In addition, mutual expectations are clear, mutual trust is self-evident, the transaction costs of the relationship are low, and positive 'vibes' spread throughout and beyond the department. Conversely, top-level tensions and conflicts that become visible to third parties entail a loss of reputation for the ministry as a whole. Such 'domestic' troubles both impact everything ministers and officials do as well as limit their effectiveness in their respective worlds outside the ministry. This idealized world of political-administrative ('managerial') collaboration suits the Dutch institutional heritage. One could argue that Dutch macro-political consensualism, based on the enlightened self-interest of culturally distinct subgroups who realize that none of them could govern without the others, has now spread to the norms and predispositions of the once hierarchically divided micro-political world of the core executive.

The second world is one of caution and well as (hidden) conflict and hierarchy. Politicians and bureaucrats are forced by institutional design and political circumstance to live together at the top of the core executive. In actual practice, however, they tend to keep to themselves, if anything even tending to drift further and further apart. The emergence of this world is definitely a break with tradition – and therefore requires further explanation. Whereas, in the first postwar decades, political-administrative relations were largely a non-issue, and were firmly cast in a Weberian mould, in the last decade, successive Dutch governments have entered office bringing with them a rather negative rhetoric about 'the bureaucracy'. In addition, government has increased its leeway for involving itself in top civil service appointments. Much more frequently than in the past ministers have pointed their fingers publicly at officials they felt were incompetent, too vocal or otherwise troublesome. After such a public vote of no confidence, these officials have usually 'moved on'. This in turn has bred civil service unease and a culture of distrust that is narrowly hidden behind a veil of managerial professionalism and rather macho assertions that 'everything is under control here'.

As a result, in The Netherlands, 'keep the minister out of trouble' and 'keep your head down' have become the predominant imperative of top departmental officials. It is also an imperative that is adopted because this is the best route for keeping oneself out of trouble. This has bred a defensive attitude in which in many respects hierarchy is re-emphasized. The political and media environment are being scanned more for threats than opportunities. At the political level, there is a strong emphasis on 'management contracts' which politicians believe will buy them predictable and reliable

 

bureaucratic behaviour. Within the organization of departments themselves, the management of internal information flows and external contacts tends to become more and more centralized. The 1980's rhetoric of 'delayering' of departments in order for them to become flatter, that is, more 'professional' organizations, has completely evaporated. Bureaucratic 'mandarins' of the Sir Humphrey kind are no longer the major concern. The chief contemporary threat to productive Dutch political-administrative relations is not excessive bureaucratic power – as Weber feared (Weber 1919 (reprinted 1977)) – but excessive bureaucratic caution and deference to political masters – a situation that is somewhat more along the lines of Wilson's worst-case scenario (Wilson 1987, reprinted in Stillman (ed.) 1976).

How can we explain the evolution and co-existence of these two contrasting worlds of political-administrative relationship as they emerged from our conversations? One world is one where both parties idealize living together; the other shows that they are growing apart. Several tendencies may have stimulated the development of this ambivalent situation. Although our initial research design was basically a descriptive one and not one geared to test hypotheses regarding this question, we can make some intelligent speculations based on our material and on subsequent interactions with key players in the core executive game.

*Civil service changes*

Over the last two decades several administrative reforms have taken place that have shifted senior bureaucrats' incentives. These reforms may well have affected the nature of the political-administrative 'bargain' (see Hood 2001a, b). In the Dutch case, administrative reforms such as agencification and civil service managerialism arrived comparatively late; in addition, compared to many Anglo-Saxon countries, they were incremental and limited in scope (Toonen 2001). Nevertheless, they have undoubtedly stimulated demographic and cultural changes. Demographically, the emphasis on top-level job rotation has led to an increasing number of outsiders (from business, local/regional government, non-profit), as well as women and comparatively younger people, reaching the top 3 ranks in the ministries. The use of competence-based selection and promotion has promoted a shift towards generic managerial qualities rather than specialized knowledge and long-time experience in a policy domain. This move has been strengthened further by a deliberate assault on departmentalism: the so-called 'Top Management Group' (the top 75 civil servants) has been infused with an ethos that emphasizes collaboration across departmental boundaries. Institutionalized professional values and a shared loyalty to 'Netherlands Inc.' are meant to crowd out the old, deep-rooted sectarian parochialism and in-fighting. In addition, agencification has bred a new caste of executive: the results-oriented manager who pride themselves on their aloofness from politics, and who prefer to have clear performance contracts, lump-sum budgets and freedom from departmental micromanagement.

 

It is obvious that there have been some unintended side effects from these institutional changes. One is that, paradoxically, the display of civil service unity is viewed as intimidating rather than reassuring by ministers. When, in the old system, ministers could fully rely on the fierce departmental loyalty of their top advisers in the bureaucratic and budgetary battles with other departments, there is the possibility now that some ministers may fear that some of their aides are more likely to 'see the bigger picture' and 'take the long-term view', and therefore transfer part of their political loyalty to the governing coalition's programme or the integrity of the state as a whole rather than doggedly serving the minister's individual aims.

Another effect of these institutional changes is that the scope for conflict between ministers (and their departmental advisers) and the 'execucrats' in the agencies has increased. Agency bosses want to be governed by the logic of contracts: clarity, predictability, measurability, reduction of transaction costs. While not disagreeing with that in principle, in practice, ministers are prone to want to exercise *ad hoc* influence on agency behaviour when prompted to do so by powerful political constituencies. And this is exactly what has happened in many of the more highly visible and politically sensitive domains of policy implementation – to the mutual frustration of both parties.

***Shifting accountability practices***

The political-bureaucratic confrontations of the 1990s evidenced a marked change in the interpretation of the traditional doctrine of ministerial responsibility. The formal doctrine holds that the minister can be held responsible by parliament for every act or omission of every civil servant within his portfolio. Starting in the 1970s, consecutive governments have started to invoke a much more limited notion of accountability, where ministers can only be held responsible for those matters they can reasonably be expected to have known about and influence. 'Risk-based' comprehensive accountability has thus been replaced by what can be called 'guilt-based' forensic accountability. Under this latter philosophy, reports of major incidents or policy failures have tended to elicit ministerial defences that emphasize bureaucratic failures to inform them in a timely, complete and truthful fashion about the problems at hand. This then produces inquiries and deep forays into the bureaucratic machinery in order to establish who knew what when, and who communicated what to whom. The outcome of these investigations has often been that civil servants, rather than their responsible political superiors, have been exposed to sanctions. This doctrinal shift and its consequences have left deep scars within the ministries. Experts argue that this has led to an erosion of trust in political-bureaucratic relationships (Nieuwenkamp 2001).

During the interviews we undertook, a great majority of the civil servants interviewed mentioned this development as a prime cause of concern for them personally, and as a factor that seriously complicated their relationships with politicians. For one thing, it forces them to remain much

 

more cautious *vis-à-vis* their ministers: 'can they be trusted to protect us when push comes to shove?' The accountability shift has contributed to a climate where many civil servants prefer to 'play it safe' by making sure there are a lot of (electronic) witnesses to anything they do that might be, or ever become, politically sensitive. Quite a few civil servants throughout the hierarchy maintain 'shadow files' in order to, as one interviewee expressed it, 'to prove that it wasn't me when the shit hits the fan'. In a department where a minister is seen to have (needlessly) ridden rough-shot over some officials' backs in order to placate his political critics, this tendency increases. Incoming governments tend to pay lip service to the classic accountability doctrine and the value of productive collaboration with the civil service, but thereafter some ministers resort to blame-avoidance strategies that presume a narrow ministerial and wide bureaucratic responsibility (Van Thijn 1998). As a result, widespread fear of the unpredictable nature of the contemporary political accountability game among senior bureaucrats is a big hurdle to cross in any attempt to open up and upgrade the quality of communication at the heart of the core executive. In addition, it has stimulated rigidity in the relationships with MPs: parliament has become an entity to be kept at a distance, a disturbing element in the business of government, both to be scoffed at and guarded against.

### *Political changes*

Two developments in the political domain have affected political-bureaucratic relationships most clearly. The massive electoral fluctuations that characterized the last parliamentary contests turned the Dutch electorate into the most unstable body of voters of Western Europe (Holsteyn and Irwin 2002). The increasing volatility of the Dutch voter and the fear of political punishment by the electorate have made politicians aspire to be both responsive to the public and increasingly 'performance oriented'. Moreover, the increase of media reports and investigative journalism searching for government misdemeanours, scandals and misconduct, and focusing on political personalities, has turned politics into a 'permanent campaign' that echoes the issues generated in the media. Both ministers and civil servants complained in the interviews about the intense pressure on the departments due to the demands from parliament and the excessive media attention. This means that a minister's qualities for presenting and selling policies to the media and parliament have become a key concern of departments. However, sometimes ministers feel 'forced' either to demonstrate publicly that they are in control of their departments or to make commitments or promises to change policy plans, something that may frustrate civil servants and undermine the departmental agenda.

### *Special case or general trend?*

The Dutch case is not unique. In many countries, administrative reforms, new public management, politicization and political changes have created

 

new demands affecting the roles and workings of ministers and top officials. Several studies indicate similar shifts in the structural and cultural incentives governing the role conceptions of politicians and bureaucrats and, consequently, the nature of their relationships. Rhodes and Weller (2001) show how similar changes in the political policy advice and managerial roles of departmental secretaries have taken place in various countries: senior civil servants must be useful to the political officeholder in managing an increasingly complex environment. Hence, top level bureaucratic work can no longer be reduced to giving policy advice but is more and more a matter of support and fire-fighting. Peters and Pierre (2001) have shown how public management reforms have created new demands on top officials throughout the OECD countries. They favour 'can-do' managers who 'deliver' for their ministers. Likewise, Christensen and Lægreid (2003b) describe how administrative reform in Norway has made the role of central executive political and administrative leaders both more complex and ambiguous as well as more conflict-ridden.

Richards and Smith (2002) point out that, contrary to the normative assumptions of the Westminster model, a more appropriate reflection of the relationship between ministers and civil servants is one of co-dependency based on an exchange of resources; departments want strong ministers, capable of defending their interests in the political arena and beyond. Ministers, conversely, need officials who bring expertise, in terms of both policy-making and the bureaucratic process, loyalty, and the ability to protect their ministers. Even so, they put forward the view that new public management, more policy-orientated ministers, and a greater use of special advisers have undermined the traditional notions of good political-administrative relationships in Britain; it has also notably increased the potential of conflict between ministers and officials (Richards and Smith 2004). Likewise, Wilson and Barker (2003, p. 370) argue that the British situation has shifted more and more away from the stable mutual respect between bureaucrats and politicians, described in Aberbach *et al.*'s (1981) image IV, towards a less happy and harmonious relationship between bureaucrats and politicians.

## CONCLUSION: GROWING APART?

Political-bureaucratic relationships in the Dutch core executive emerge from this study as a vital but delicate part of the fabric of government. From our research, we distilled some key qualities that both ministers and officials perceive as essential for each other in order to perform their roles well as well as what each party ideally should bring to the relationship. A highly professional policy development and the capacity to deliver intended outcomes in policy implementation are emphasized – probably as an effect of the ongoing reforms in the civil service – as valuable elements of the administrative role. Shifts in the political accountability doctrine and a more politically exposed 'executive branch' have put a premium on ministerial ability to 'manage' the standing and legitimacy of the department. This

 

includes the capacity to deliver in cabinet, parliament and policy networks; competent media performance; and political 'Teflon capacity' when put under pressure (that is, faced with a critical parliament, and during media frenzies in the wake of critical incidents, presumed fiascoes and scandals). These qualities are now regarded by civil servants as the pivotal assets of a 'good' minister. Likewise, ministers want their top officials to be politically savvy – while at the same time adhering to the classic Weberian norm of politically neutral, professional bureaucrats.

The norms governing the relationships of ministers and top officials reflect the growing awareness of interdependency: both sides stress professionalism, teamwork, collaboration and complementarity. In the last decade, a number of highly publicized overt confrontations, as well as the relentless politicization of real and perceived policy failures, have produced a climate of mutual caution and sometimes outright suspicion. As a result, the negotiated order between politics and bureaucracy in the Dutch core executive is tenuous and there is steady growth of the outside pressures that put it to the test: critical incidents, media-hypes, policy fiascoes, conflicts with parliament. These pressures increase the likelihood that relations between ministers and bureaucrats are regarded as 'unsafe' by both. Under these conditions, reciprocity and mutual understanding give way to mutual risk avoidance and hence less productive collaboration at the very heart of national government.

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