REVIEWS

POLICY BUREAUCRACY: GOVERNMENT WITH A CAST OF THOUSANDS

Edward C. Page and Bill Jenkins
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Page and Jenkins have done students of bureaucracy and public policy-making a great favour by researching and writing this book. It exposes the world of hitherto largely unstudied, taken for granted, sets of actors on public organizations and public policy-making processes, namely the many – hence the subtitle – middle-ranking officials working in UK government departments and agencies who do the bulk of thinking up, preparing, advising on, administering and evaluating public policies and programmes. The authors have interviewed more than 125 of them across a range of UK ministries, asked them what they were doing in their jobs, how they were doing it (what their expertise and contribution consisted of, what problems they ran into, how they related to their superiors, the minister, colleagues in other ministries, and so on), how they came to hold these jobs, and how they expected their careers to evolve. And they have reported their findings in a concise book, made lively by many extensive quotes from the interviews that offer readers ample evidence of the bewildering variety of subjects that these 'invisible' bureaucrats deal with on a daily basis. Opponents of big government will be bewildered by the sheer scope of British central government's policy interventions, even in the post-Thatcher era, whereas others can perhaps take comfort that conscientious, dedicated and reasonably skilful people are looking after the public interest in real life. That, at least, is how the authors depict 'their' bureaucrats.

The book indeed paints a benign picture of bureaucracy at the middle level. No would-be Sir Humphreys, wont to manipulate their political masters, are to be found in it. It is even quite critical of rational choice inspired theories of bureaucratic behaviour which posit that bureaucrats are driven by the desire to maiximize their self-interest, whether they take that to be budget/size maximization (Niskanen), interesting and influential issue domains (as in bureau-shaping theories), or maximum autonomy from

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political superiors (as in the principal-agent approach, which is the chief target of the authors' analytical critique at the end of the book). Nor does it uphold the common thesis that it is the issue experts and zealots at the middle level that are the key to parochial departmentalism that makes 'joining up' interdepartmental policies so notoriously difficult. Instead it abounds with anecdotal evidence that policy bureaucrats are perfectly ordinary human beings (if not wholly 'representative' of the total population), driven to do a workmanlike job in the assignments they happen to have been given, and – most importantly – NOT narrow technical experts who, as Weber feared, are prone to eschew political control.

On the contrary, insofar as they possess expertise, these policy bureaucrats are not subject area specialists but rather experts in the (inter)organizational process of policy-making within government. Since most of them move jobs relatively frequently they gain ample and diverse experience in what it takes to craft a good policy, advise superiors in a timely and relevant fashion, deal with other ministries and outside interest groups in sensible ways, and so on. Some are in a better position than others to also get a reliable feel for the 'mind of the minister' and the political context in which policy-making takes place – but many of them do so in the course of their careers. That is what they tend to be experts in – the authors call it 'improvised expertise' whereas the admittedly less catchy term of 'process expertise' captures their meaning much better – much more so it seems to this reviewer than in the intricate details of the policies at hand. This limited technical expertise may occasionally threaten the substantive quality of the policy advice given. It may also breed a certain degree of dependence upon other, external, sources of subject matter expertise. But the authors are adamant that at least it curbs the narrow zealotry, turf instincts and unhealthy identification with particular policy paradigms or external interest groups that many classical political science accounts of bureaucracy have tended to emphasize.

Moreover, Page and Jenkins's middle-level bureaucrats do exactly the opposite of what Weber argued they were prone to do and what the *Yes, Minister* series was built around; instead of eschewing and subverting hierarchical and, particularly, political control, they proactively seek it. The authors have a much better catchphrase here: they call this 'invited authority'. The term refers to a tendency for these bureaucrats to seek out their superiors for direction and approval at all the important stages and for all the politically or strategically sensitive aspects of their policy work. They don't wait for directives and decisions to come down, which they then are supposed to implement. Instead they seek to anticipate what might be important to ministers, what might be the preferred policy line, start working on these assumptions, and then constantly scan their environment for cues as to the direction in which they should develop policies. Such cues can be relatively vague (such as the perceived 'thrust' of government policy) or highly specific (experience from frequent interaction

with the executive level), but the crucial point the book makes is that policy bureaucrats do not feel they possess a high degree of discretion, nor do they regret that they don't. They seem thoroughly aware that without effective cue-taking they reduce the chances of securing top-level support and commitment, something they have learned is essential if the policy or initiative in question is ever to move beyond the drawing board and stand a chance of surviving the unavoidable (hierarchical, interdepartmental, political) vetting that occurs before a middle-level proposal is to gain any real-world significance.

These two important modifications of the conventional wisdom about bureaucracy alone make the book worthwhile reading. This is especially the case for people who have little or no direct exposure to life in the bureaucracy. For students and those academics who spend their lives in university campuses writing about politics and government, this book may be an important eye opener, encouraging them to rethink some of their stereotypes.

Having said that, there are, as always, things to take issue with. The study is better on description than on analysis, although the excellent final chapter makes up for what I take to be an overly cautious, inductivist approach in much of the rest of the book. But, more importantly, there is a methodological issue to be pondered. The study relies exclusively on 20-minute interviews with middle-ranking officials. This has two pivotal limitations: the perspective on departmental policy bureaucrats could have been sharpened if not only they themselves but also their superiors, external counterparts and perhaps counterparts in executive agencies had been interviewed; in addition, those of us who have carried out extensive interviewing of bureaucrats might be sceptical if not a little baffled about the possibility of getting solid information about complex and subtle subject matter such as the nature of bureaucratic policy work from any respondent in the course of an interview that lasts just long enough for the initial introductions and background questions to be made. These interviews were over before there any sort of rapport between interviewer and interviewee could have developed. If I were Page and Jenkins I would ponder what these respondents chose NOT to tell me – knowing they could get away with strategic omissions very easily in the interview format given. Hence, although I strongly support the overall thrust of the picture of policy bureaucracy painted in this book, a view partly based on my own experience conducting studies inside the Dutch departmental bureaucracy, I am less sanguine about the almost completely benign, innocuous picture that emerges about the relations between these bureaucrats and their superiors. What do these people do if they work for a 'weak' or a 'nasty' minister, for example, or if they have a departmental boss who is mischievous, incompetent, or simply disagrees with them on policy substance? What do they do if issues they have learned from experience are extremely important do not enjoy any political priority? What if cutbacks or reforms

threaten their established routines? Page and Jenkins paint a picture of bureaucratic work that is almost completely free of dilemmas, hard choices, scarcity, and ethical conundrums (the stuff of bureaucratic life that one picks up if one does not rely exclusively on short interviews but goes for a more in-depth or observational approach). The result is something that seems too good to be true.

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