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Beyond ‘types’ in environmental agencies

Dr Brian Coffey contends that Dr Sue Briggs’ commentary – ‘From advocates to zealots’ (Public Administration Today, issue 27; July-September 2011) – on bureaucratic types in environmental agencies – ‘raises an important issue: the need for reformers to understand the characteristics of public servants’.

More broadly, it also highlights the need for reform processes to be carefully thought through. Given the importance of adequately responding to the serious environmental challenges that confront us all, and the contested nature of many environmental issues, this is an area that is worthy of further investigation.

While Dr Briggs’ piece is useful for highlighting the need to recognise the diversity of public servants in environmental agencies (ten distinct types are identified), there is also a need to consider the broader dynamics informing these agencies. That is because while the categories presented have some appeal – we can all think of candidates that fit the various categories – they potentially serve to reinforce existing power relations within the public sector rather than provide a sound basis for reform, and do not grapple with broader influences.

My concerns with the types presented centre around the ideas that these identities are fixed, no consideration is given to the contexts acting upon public servants, and there is no sense that the ‘goals of society’ are contested. The comments that follow are drawn from my public sector experience and insights gained as part of my PhD research, which included undertaking 26 semi-structured interviews with a variety of environmental policy players. (Their identities remain confidential by the use of a generic descriptor – for example: ‘senior policy advisor’.)

First, Briggs’ commentary does not acknowledge that the way people act may be influenced by the situation they find themselves in, and hence may vary over time or circumstance. We fit either one of the 10 types outlined, such as ‘advocates’, ‘climbers’, ‘competents’, ‘dilettantes’, ‘obstructors’, or ‘zealots’, or some combination of such types (Briggs 2011). This overlooks the effect of labelling, and the power relations inherent in such practices. Nor does it recognise the potential presence of ‘bullies’.

Some insights into these dynamics are apparent from contributions provided by public servants interviewed as part of my PhD studies. One senior executive officer referred to other staff as follows: ‘I think part of the problem is that we’re in a department where there are a lot of zealots. You know people who have got deep, personal and professional commitments to the ideas that underpin their work … lots of our own people have their own definitions and their own strong views on what this stuff should mean, you constantly get judgmentalism going on internally, saying ah, you know, “that’s not good enough”, “that’s not pure enough”, “that’s not whatever”, and that can be a little disconcerting for people.’ (Senior executive officer 24).

‘Reformers of public sector agencies not only need to understand the characteristics of public servants, they also need to understand questions of power and the politics of labelling, the characteristics of the environment as a policy issue, and the diversity of perspectives on environmental issues.’

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By contrast, a different executive valued the contribution of such staff, in the following terms: ‘There is a cadre of policy activists in government who have been there a long time, who are an extraordinary source of knowledge and capacity. They all wax and wane in terms of how much influence they have … But without that milieu then we wouldn’t get much going. There are people I know in the biodiversity area, who I think have made things happen under a whole range of governments. They are just extraordinary, just amazing people.’ (Senior executive officer 20).

Whether or not someone is labelled as one type or another is, therefore, a matter of power, rather than a matter of type.

Secondly, the way in which public sector structures, processes and cultures influence the behaviour of individual public servants also needs to be considered. For example, how do fixed term employment arrangements, or competitive performance pay-based systems (as promoted under new public management) affect the work practices of individual public servants?

Attention also needs to be directed to the effects of organisational culture on the practices of individuals – we are all aware of particular public service agencies where the culture is toxic. Furthermore, the impact of managerialism – ‘content free’ management – in areas that require significant levels of content knowledge and skill, and the impact this has on individual public servants, needs to be considered. (I am not denying the importance of good management, but management divorced from substance can be problematic). It must be a source of considerable frustration for people with considerable professional expertise to be managed by those without requisite expertise, and for their expertise not to be valued. One respondent explained: ‘A number of people who had expertise in particular areas were shuffled around in areas that they had no expertise. Nice theory perhaps, it might have had some managerial benefits, highly counterproductive in terms of getting a good outcome.’ (Senior policy officer 5).

Generic skills may also be less effective when dealing with environmental issues because of the particular challenges such issues pose for policy. The following
characteristics are more likely to be present in environmental policy than other areas of policy – effects across temporal and spatial scales, limits and thresholds, irreversibility, irreplaceability, connectivity and complexity, uncertainty, cumulative impacts, moral and ethical dimensions and novelty (Dovers 1997). The broader point from this insight is that approaches to reform pursued in the public sector have been developed and implemented without an appreciation of the above characteristics, and so arguably their value in environmental settings may be limited.

Thirdly, environmental agencies are frequently reformed, and yet the implications of continual reform on staff, or organisational capacity, are seldom considered. For example, in Victoria between 1999 and 2010, three different approaches to the organisation of environmental responsibilities were established. First, there was the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, which sought to integrate environment with primary industries. Later, there was the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), which sought to integrate environment with planning, and transferred responsibilities for primary industries to a standalone department. DSE’s planning responsibilities were finally transferred to another department, leaving DSE to concentrate solely on the environment. Further changes have occurred following the 2010 state election. Individual divisions within DSE also have been subjected to restructuring and staff cuts, as is currently proposed by the Liberal-National Coalition state government, and which occurred within the Land Stewardship and Biodiversity Group of DSE during 2006.

This would appear to starkly contrast with the relatively stable organisational histories of central agencies such as the Department of Premier and Cabinet and Department of Treasury and Finance – notwithstanding the discursive shift from Keynesianism to neoliberalism – while people may come and go, there is some continuity in the basic structure, culture, and purpose. This suggests there are widely divergent views about how environmental responsibilities should be arranged in the machinery of government. Put simply, political leaders have no common view on this, which has consequences for public servants working in those agencies, and the beneficiaries of the services they provide.

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Finally, it needs to be recognised that ‘the goals of the bureaucracy for society at large’ (Briggs 2011, p 63) are contested, both within the public sector, and beyond. In the realm of environmental policy and management there are divergent perspectives on nature, the environment, and concepts such as sustainability (Dryzek 2005; Hopwood et al. 2005). One example of the diversity and lack of clarity, around how to approach environmental policy issues, is provided by an executive involved in the development of a major environmental policy statement, who explained: ‘I’d have to say that the hardest part of it was actually getting a sense of what ministers, secretaries and deputy secretaries wanted to be different out of this exercise.’

(Senior executive officer 20)

Similarly, another commented: ‘We’ve got a lot of in-the-box thinkers within government, and I’m talking about management levels of government’. (Policy manager 15). These comments highlight there are not only different personality types, but also qualitatively different views about the environment, and what needs to be done to sustain it. Further, the production of policy texts is complex, where ‘authorship’ of texts can be considered in terms of animators – those who actually make the sounds, or put the mark on the paper; authors – those who put the words together and are responsible for the wording; and principals – those whose position is represented by the words. (Fairclough 1992, p 78). This indicates not only that there may be conflicting views between particular ministers, senior public servants and other public sector staff about how to deal with environmental issues, but also conflicting views about the role that different participants have in the production of policy documents.

In conclusion, reformers of public sector agencies not only need to understand the characteristics of public servants, they also need to understand questions of power and the politics of labelling, the characteristics of the environment as a policy issue, and the diversity of perspectives on environmental issues.

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