

Civil Service Policy-Making Competency: Reflections from a British-German Study

Martin Lodge (Department of Government and ESRC Centre for the Analysis of Risk and Regulation, London School of Economics) and Christopher Hood (All Souls College, Oxford and Director, ESRC Public Services Programme)

Background

The following seven observations are largely based on a comparative study of civil service competency¹ in policy-making in the UK Department of Trade and Industry and the (then) Federal Economics ministry in Germany.² The report of the study is available from the website of LSE's ESRC Centre for Analysis of Risk and Regulation.³

POLICY-MAKING COMPETENCY: SEVEN OBSERVATIONS

Competency is not just delivery

1. Over the past twenty years at least, discussion of civil service competency in the UK has focused overwhelmingly on issues of 'service delivery' and the management qualities (or deficits) associated with delivering effective public services to citizens. Such matters, as well as the process management skills emphasised in the recently announced 'Professional Skills for Government' initiative for departmental management (October 2004), are undeniably and perennially important. But they should not overshadow the issue of civil service competency in policy-making, and indeed numerous well-informed observers (such as Donald Savoie in Canada) have pointed to the dangers of trying to fix service delivery competency without paying at least equivalent attention to policy making competency. Indeed, Savoie goes so far as

¹. Competency is an idea that has several different strains, and ideas about th

to claim that it is the latter tha

policy-making – something that would have to be done from inside, and not take the form of a hand-me-down business competency framework.

A New Age Presents New Challenges for Policy Competency

3. Yet, despite the beguiling mantra of ‘delivery’, policy-making competency in national civil service systems is perhaps more important than ever in current conditions. The contemporary age presents sharp new challenges for civil servants’ policy competency for at least three related reasons

(a) The subject-expertise needed for effective and well-informed policy-making is decreasingly likely to be available within the central parts of the public bureaucracy as in-house expertise is squeezed, outsourced or simply unavailable. So civil servants increasingly need the sort of competency that involves successfully identifying, assessing and relating to the sources of that expertise, wherever it may be found;

(b) Even outside the boundaries of government organization, in an age of globalized science and technical expertise, there is no longer any guarantee that established sources of national expertise, even in developed countries such as the UK or Germany, are ‘best in world’ for all purposes. So civil servants increasingly need the sort of competency that enables them to opera

(a) consultation within an increasingly complex and multi-layered structure of government

(b) The ability and opportunity to switch between government and business experience via secondments of civil servants to business and from business into the civil service. Numerous initiatives of this kind have been mounted in the UK over the past twenty years, and we found more instances of it among the policy-making civil servants in our UK case than in the German one, where legal provisions largely precluded such interchanges. But it must be asked how such interchanges can be organized so as to develop the policy-making competencies of the secondees.

(c) The ability and opportunity to work in different national civil service settings. Traditionally confined to the foreign service (and even there typically within the 'bubble' of the national corps), this requirement runs up against both formal and informal barriers to movement of this kind. In our study, most of the policy-making civil servants who had gained international experience in both countries had done so by working for international organizations, or working for the UK in Brussels. But it must be asked whether a far more international pattern of recruitment to policy-making positions in the civil service is needed to develop such competencies.

Overall

The Civil Service competency frameworks that first appeared in their modern form about a decade ago have tended to emphasize delivery and 'corporate-man' (or '-woman') attributes. Policy-making competencies should not be squeezed out by this approach and the challenge now is to develop a new generation of competency frameworks that put policy competencies at centre stage.

13 December 2004