1. Civil service systems in Western Europe: an introduction^1

Frits M. van der Meer

More than ever, government is reliant on the professional qualities of the public workforce: civil servants (Raadschelders et al. 2007). In the past, the role and supposed power of civil servants in the policymaking process have been discussed and questioned by many in the political and the scientific communities. Assessments vary from the (in)ability of bureaucracy in Weberian terminology to a Beamtenherrschaft (rule by bureaucrats). Contrary to normative aspects of bureaucratic involvement, empirical research in the structure and functioning of civil service systems has been less profuse. Additional in-depth knowledge of civil service systems is nowadays more important than ever.

First, civil service systems are a basic constituent part of our systems of government. A better understanding of government implies that salient attributes of civil service systems have to be determined. To determine those attributes and to put them into perspective, a comparative approach is needed.

A second reason to pursue comparative civil service research can be found in the ongoing process of public sector reform. For more than a century, policies have been directed at reforming the public sector; in fact, public sector reform has almost become institutionalised. Although there is a certain bias towards emphasising temporary and national singularities, administrative reform is not confined to a few isolated countries. Since modern government very much depends on civil servants, the implications and demands for civil service reform are immense. Government reform, and especially initiatives pertaining to the reform of the civil service, has been placed high on the political agenda.

Two important elements stand out in the debate on civil service system reform: the need for improving performance and the necessity of enhancing the legitimacy of the civil service (Perry and Raadschelders 1995). Before attempting to reform civil service systems, we must first know what to reform. As a ‘benchmark’ approach is increasingly used, comparative knowledge of civil service systems is advantageous.

Notwithstanding the marked interest in civil service reform, in-depth comparative analyses of civil service systems are rather rare. The step of defining the nature and development of civil service systems is omitted with some unfortunate consequences for the quality of the reform proposals. In order to fill some voids in the current state of the art of civil service research, a comparative study of Western European civil service systems has been
presented in the first edition of this volume. In this second edition an updated version will be presented.

Comparative civil service research requires a framework to define the issues involved and the theoretical stance taken. The development of such a framework has been an integral part of the civil service project, which was designed in 1991 with the creation of a ‘civil service research consortium’. The purpose of the consortium is to stimulate international comparative research on civil service systems. The consortium has been coordinated by the School of Public and Environmental Affairs of Indiana University and the Department of Public Administration of Leiden University. The Directorate General of Public Administration of the Dutch Home Office is also a participant in the project.

From the outset, this research project has been conceived as a two-stage project; the first stage is conceptual and the second stage is empirical. During the first phase, the basic concepts and the framework for conducting the comparative work were produced. Indiana University Press published the results under the editorship of Hans J.G.M. Bekke, James L. Perry and Theo A.J. Toonen as Civil Service Systems in Comparative Perspective in 1996. The theoretical framework has served as a guideline for empirical country studies encompassing major regions of the world (Asia, Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, and the Anglo-Saxon speaking countries). In 2007, a volume encompassing the different regional studies and thematic approaches was published under the title The Civil Service in the 21st Century using multi-level governance and the enabling framework state as key concepts (Raadschelders et al. 2007).

In this introductory chapter, the outline and the approach used in this volume on Western European civil service systems will be defined. First, the neo-institutional framework used in the different chapters is explained. This is followed by a more in-depth exploration of the comparative nature of this study. Finally, attention is focused on the structural dimension of civil service systems. This structural dimension is explored in themes such as internal labour markets, reform and diffusion. The interface of civil service systems and their political and societal environment is studied by looking at issues such as representativeness, politicisation and public opinion. The dynamic nature of civil service systems is emphasised by examining the historical development of civil service systems.

A NEO-INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH TO CIVIL SERVICE SYSTEMS RESEARCH

The core concept in the research design used in this book is ‘civil service systems’. Civil service systems are described as ‘mediating institutions that
mobilise human resources in the service of the affairs of the state in a given territory’ (Morgan and Perry 1988). By using civil service systems instead of, for instance, the better known concept of bureaucracy, some common misconceptions can be avoided. Bureaucracy has a manifold meaning even when used in a classical Weberian sense (a form of organisation, a state of societal development and a staff of officials supporting the implementation of authority). Besides this Weberian plurality of notions, in everyday life, bureaucracy has acquired – rightly or wrongly – a pejorative meaning. In his concise study of the bureaucratic concept, Martin Albrov suggests that it is perhaps better to drop the name (Albrow 1970).

The concept of ‘civil service systems’ implies a number of things. This definition implies that an institutional approach is used (Bekke et al. 1996). The crucial words in our definition are ‘mediating institutions’. To avoid any misunderstanding, institutions are not considered identical to organisations as was the case in previous institutional theory. Likewise, as the title Civil Service Systems in Comparative Perspective reveals, it refers to a comparative neo-institutional approach. Douglass North (1990) argues that institutions have to be separated from organisations. Institutions are the driving forces behind organisations in that they direct organisational behaviour. Civil service systems are to be seen as systems of rules and authority relations, which shape the behaviour of the members of civil services. A rule contains norms about prescribed behaviour and constitutes a point of convergence for the expectations of the actors involved (Kiser and Ostrom 1982; Krasner 1983; Bekke et al. 1996). ‘Shape’ implies that it adds to the continuation of certain modes of that behaviour.

Those formal and informal rules embodied in civil service systems can pertain to what has been called by Kiser and Ostrom the three worlds of action. A first level has been termed the operational level. What is actually done in a civil service system context? With respect to the operational rules in the personnel management system, it concerns how people are recruited, promoted, rewarded and so on.

A second level of institutional analysis refers to the collective choice level. This level relates to the what, why, when and how civil service systems reform. According to these collective choice rules, the latitude possessed by civil servants to participate in decision-making procedures is also determined.

The third level, the constitutional level, of institutional analysis relates to civil service systems as symbols for interpreting actions involving the general public, members of the civil service itself and third parties (March and Olsen 1984, 1989; Bekke et al. 1996). The open character of recruitment in certain civil service systems according to the merit principle can be viewed as a symbol representing basic values in society itself. As this last example makes clear, these three levels are closely intertwined.
Using a neo-institutional approach, the specific nature and development of civil service systems are emphasised. We have to look at how these systems evolved and, more specifically, what factors have been influencing their development. The main question to be answered is how do rules and authority relationships influence the behaviour of the members of the civil service over time? An institutional analysis of civil service systems seeks to identify:

1. the social and legal rules (that is prescribed behaviour and implicit and explicit norms) that determine the nature of a civil service system;
2. the origins of those rules; and
3. why they endure (Perry and Raadschelders 1995).

**COMPARATIVE CIVIL SERVICE SYSTEMS RESEARCH**

Considering the importance of civil service systems and the global nature of the reform efforts, it is quite remarkable that comparative (empirical) research on civil service systems has been relatively scarce. There are some well-known exceptions (Verheijen 1999; Burns and Bowornwathana 2001; Halligan 2004; Raadschelders et al. 2007; Mathur 2009). Particularly the higher civil service has received much attention (Dogan 1975; Aberbach et al. 1981; Rose 1985; Pierre 1995; Farazmand 1997; Page and Wright 1999, 2007; Peters and Pierre 2004). Recently, the OECD (PUMA and SIGMA), the IMF and the World Bank have taken a keen interest in generating information on civil service systems. Their (reform) angle (perhaps excluding SIGMA’s work on Central and Eastern Europe) has placed a heavy emphasis on the export of New Public Management concepts. While these studies may be informative and valuable, there is still scope for ‘truly’ comparative studies of civil service systems in general. Given the ongoing changes in the structure and functioning of civil service systems, a wide knowledge gap still needs to be filled.

‘Truly comparative studies’ might sound a little presumptuous. As Ridley stated in 1975, three levels of comparative work can be distinguished. First, comparisons can be made without paying too much attention to theoretical implications. Peters (1988) has termed this approach the stamps, flags and coins approach. This phraseology might sound somewhat denigrating, but voyeurism, at least confined to social science, doesn’t need to be condemned outright (Peters 1988, 1996). Information gathering to satisfy curiosity has a meaning on its own. There is one difficulty involved: collecting the flags, stamps and coins implies that definitions or descriptions of these collectibles are given. As such, even this kind of comparative work is not free of theoretical concepts and choices. The real problem is that these choices are often implicit.

The same difficulty holds true for a second normative inspired approach. Often comparisons are made for reasons of evaluating (in the sense of ranking)
(seemingly) related phenomena. To give a simple example, as a tourist, do we prefer Greece to the Maldives as a holiday destination? Is the Dutch system of water management to be preferred over that of Bangladesh? The latter example points to the applied dimension of this normative comparison in public administration. Even while making a normative statement about cross-national variation, it could be argued that an explicit explanation for the differences is not necessary. Nevertheless, this normative inspired comparison implies some standards for evaluation.

Only in the third and final case of trying to find an explanation for cross-national variation is theory-guided research explicitly needed. As remarked by Pierre (1995), while studies of individual cases may generate general findings, which may very well be of interest in their own right, their theoretical significance and value can only be assessed in a comparative context.

Some severe difficulties are encountered when trying to use a comparative, theoretically-based analysis. Some of the issues involve what we want to compare (the dependent variables) and whether those features or systems are really comparable. Without going too deeply into this subject matter, we take a position of concentrating on a focused comparison aimed at middle-range theory (Peters 1988). In this book on Western European civil service systems, a deliberate theoretical framework is used. Given the methodological problems surrounding comparative research, some preliminary remarks about the nature of the framework are necessary.

A flexible framework has the advantage of accommodating national differences concerning conceptual meanings. But in using such a flexible approach, the equivalence problem can become acute. Is what we are trying to compare really the same (or different)? On the other hand, a rigid framework may lead to a ‘procrustean’ approach. Reality is stretched or compressed according to the conceptual needs of the framework involved. Do we lose some essential features of the component that has to be compared by extending or reducing reality?

Both questions are perhaps erroneous. The essential requirement of a comparative framework is that it helps to discover the salient features, in this case of a civil service system, by highlighting a certain societal and cultural context. Similarities and differences are therefore not only related to (parts of) civil service systems under examination, but also to their political and social setting. That setting helps to understand the prevailing differences and similarities between key parts of different civil service systems. In this context, the neo-institutional approach will serve us well.
THEMES

Having defined the need for a neo-institutional and comparative framework for civil service analysis, a final concern is the themes that will be addressed in the country chapters. These themes comprise:

1. the development (history) of the civil service system;
2. internal labour market;
3. politicisation;
4. representativeness;
5. public opinion;
6. reform and diffusion.

Internal labour markets, reform and diffusion pertain mainly to the structure of civil service systems. Although not exclusively confined to these issues the ‘managerial’ dimension is most prominent here. The relations of the civil service systems with their political and societal environments are dealt with in the sections on politicisation, representativeness and public opinion. As follows from our discussion, the interconnection between the structural dimension of civil service systems and their positioning in the relevant political and societal environments is essential for understanding the dynamics of these systems. Ample attention will be paid to this interface in the section on historical development.

Above, we mentioned that the main purpose of using an institutional approach is to obtain an idea of how rules and authority relationships shape the behaviour of members of the civil service. By employing, for instance, rules and belief systems, institutions determine patterns of behaviour over a longer period of time. It serves as an organisational memory (Douglas 1982, 1986). At the same time, institutions come into existence and change over the course of time. Using a neo-institutional approach implies that we have to put emphasis on the historical development of civil service systems. Time and history as such are empty and meaningless concepts. To put it more strongly, arguing that ‘forces of history’ account for a certain event is changing ‘time’ into a metaphysical concept. During the course of history, during a certain period of time, ‘things’ happen. Those events are shaped during that period of time. We have to explain what those forces are. A historical analysis of civil service systems can provide us with deeper insight into those forces shaping institutional development.

A historical analysis is, therefore, not only important to clarify the social and legal rules which determine the character of a civil service system, but at the same time it requires a look into the reasons for both institutional change and persistence. Major questions include: How did the civil service system develop? Which historical dynamics account for expansion or decline, change
or persistence, structure and character of civil service systems over time (Perry and Raadschelders 1995)? As a starting point for this historical analysis, most authors have used the model designed by Raadschelders and Rutgers who propose five phases in the development of civil service systems namely:

1. civil servants as personal servants;
2. civil servants as state servants;
3. civil servants as public servants;
4. the civil service as protected service; and
5. the civil service as professional service.

In our concluding chapter we will also pay attention to a sixth phase: the Europeanization of civil service systems.

In trying to explain the evolution (a term used by Raadschelders and Rutgers) of civil service systems, they suggest the following as explanatory factors:

1. the importance of nation state building;
2. the demarcation between the public and private domains of life;
3. the creation of a separate civil service identity with respect to, amongst others, their legal status;
4. the expansion of government tasks; and
5. the increasing professionalism of the civil service.

In the following chapters, these issues are taken up and the extent to which these factors can help explain the development in the various countries is examined.

Mobilising human resources in the service of the state implies that a primary function of civil service systems is that of personnel systems. Those personnel systems can be perceived as more or less closed system for managing human resources or, to use a different term, internal labour markets. Lois Wise argues that internal labour markets involve administrative policies and practices that determine the way human resources are used and rewarded within an organisation. These policies and procedures relate to the (formal and informal) rules pertaining to job definition or classification, deployment (including mobility) and staff development, job security and membership, and reward structures and wage rules (Wise 1996). Since these rules are interrelated, they define the particular nature of the internal labour market of a civil service system. Change occurring in one part of the internal labour market will have consequences for other parts. To give only one example, changing the system of recruitment from a job system to a career system can have major implications for management development and training practices.
While internal labour markets and personnel systems put emphasis on the ‘internal’ aspects of civil service systems, representativeness relates to the relationship of the civil service system to society. Civil servants are both members of an organisation and members of society. Their behaviour is partly influenced by the civil service structures they belong to and partly by the societal, cultural and economic environment (Peters 1996).

One can speak of representativeness in an empirical and normative way. The latter emphasises the importance of policies directed at increasing the level of representativeness in a civil service system. Van der Meer and Roborgh (1996) stress that by examining the importance attached to the issue of representativeness, we can obtain a deeper insight into the role and position of a civil service system in a particular political, administrative and societal context. The question of whether to pursue representativeness pertains directly to views on how the legitimacy of government and the responsiveness of the public service can be enhanced. In this volume, the differences between, for instance, France and The Netherlands are illustrative. In the former, representativeness as a policy issue is neglected, while in the latter case it is positioned high on the policy agenda. As will be explained later, the view on the position and role of the state in society is crucial for understanding these differences.

Closely related to the issue of representativeness is the politicisation of the civil service. The relation between politics and the civil service has drawn much attention in European public administration, particularly since the 1960s. This is particularly the case with the issue of politicisation of the civil service or, conversely, the bureaucratisation of politics. Although the politics–administration dichotomy has been rebutted time and again, the issue of the demarcation between the political and administrative domains remains as alive as ever. However perplexing the interface between the political and administrative systems may be, an examination of that interface remains an important issue, not only with respect to the efficiency and effectiveness of government, but also given the importance attached to issues such as the legitimacy and responsiveness of government.

Politicisation is a complex issue, and it can have many different meanings. Two of the most recurring dimensions are the politicisation of recruitment and the politicisation of behaviour. With respect to the last, the question can be raised what the ideal type is, which dominates within the civil service system. This refers to the normative aspect. To use two extremes: is the emphasis still on a neutral civil service implementing political decisions or is a more symbiotic relationship fostered? What does this mean for recruitment? With respect to the empirical side, we have to look at the actual interdependency between the political and administrative systems and the practice of including political criteria in the recruitment and selection criteria.

Public opinion concerns the external perception of the civil service system. The legitimacy and performance of a civil service system is dependent on the
views of the general public and the elite. Public opinion research on the civil service invariably reveals a negative attitude toward the civil service. There is frequently a more negative general perception than direct contact with a civil servant would suggest. Nevertheless, variation does exist. What are the reasons for the more negative general attitude on the one hand, and the less negative attitude for specific civil service action? Second, how can cross-national variations be explained?

To even the most casual observer it is clear that in the last two decades massive reorganisations have ripped through all levels of government and its personnel. These reorganisations coincided with a fundamental rethinking of the role and functioning of bureaucracy and we have come to know them under the label of New Public Management (NPM). While NPM in the 1980s was primarily focused on promoting a more efficient and effective government service, the attention in the 1990s included issues such as equity, integrity and so forth. This was conceptualised as ‘good governance’. Reports of international organisations such as the OECD, the IMF, the World Bank and the EU support programmes PHARE and TACIS for central and eastern European countries are illustrative of this more inclusive focus. At the moment output orientation in New Public Management is criticized for stimulating fragmentation in the delivery of public services leading to so-called joined-up government and post-NPM reforms. The various chapters in this volume pay ample attention to these continuous civil service reforms.

In our concluding chapter, we compare the different civil service systems discussed in the book according to the issues mentioned above. A first group of questions relate to issues such as: Can we distinguish some patterns in the historical development of civil service systems or are the national experiences unique? What designs and processes of redesigning internal labour markets can be observed? Is it possible to form some clusters? What are the cross-national variations in the representativeness of these European civil service systems, both in an empirical and a normative perspective? The same questions can be raised relating to the issues of politicisation and public opinion. A second group of questions relates to the possible explanations for these similarities and differences among these civil service systems.

In this second edition of civil service systems in Western Europe the various cases have been updated with new material and topics. In addition, new chapters on Denmark, France and the United Kingdom have been included.
NOTE

1. In an earlier edition this chapter and the conclusion was co-authored with Hans Bekke.

REFERENCES


Civil service systems in Western Europe: an introduction
