

Chapter 1

A contemporary overview

During a recent college recruitment fair that we attended, a prospective student approached one of our faculty representatives and sharply asked, ‘What is public administration and what kind of job can I get with a degree in your field?’ The career-minded young woman went on to proclaim, ‘I mean, I have heard of the field, of course—everyone has. But what exactly is it and what do you teach?’ She had raised a serious question and, perhaps without even realizing it, stumbled onto an ongoing debate that has long been raging among academics and practitioners alike. Pressed to provide an immediate explanation, the faculty member simply said that ‘public administration involves the countless activities that are performed by officials in the delivery of essential public services to our nation’s citizens. Public administrators’, the faculty member went on to explain, ‘serve in roles ranging from law enforcement to civic planning, and they may be working in agencies from the local town hall all the way to the White House.’ In the simplest terms, as instructors, we aim to provide our students in public administration with the professional leadership and management skills required for them to properly “administer” these essential services.’ While this brief explanation seemed to satisfy the questioner with a useful glimpse into the field, there is certainly much more to the story. We, therefore, invite you to join us as we explore this complex and fascinating topic in greater depth.

Although the concept of the 'career civil administrator' is often historically identified with the Mesopotamian Empire almost 4,000 years ago, primordial forms of tribal leadership can be traced back 10,000 years BC to the Stone Age. Indeed as cultural anthropologist Herbert S. Lewis noted, 'leadership is a basic element in the organization of group activity in society... leadership lies at or near the heart of most political life, political competition and strife'. Human beings have always looked to civil leaders to oversee the various activities required to sustain groups of people who live together. To be sure, the role of civil leadership varies widely among cultures in accordance with the responsibilities that they are expected to perform and the powers that they wield. Whether in the form of tribal chiefs, magisterial monarchs, or democratically elected officials, civil leaders will be needed in any society to make decisions and mobilize the resources required to achieve its goals. Civil leaders, however, depend on a wide array of subordinate 'officials' to carry out these goals. The countless 'official' activities involved in carrying out these goals may be collectively referred to as the 'art' of public administration.

At its core, public administration refers to the wide array of leadership and management functions and mandates that are carried out by civil officials involved with public sector 'governance'. According to Laurence E. Lynn, Jr, Carolyn J. Heinrich, and Carolyn J. Hill, governance involves 'regimes, laws, rules, judicial decisions, and administrative practices that constrain, prescribe, and enable the provisions of publicly supported goals and services'. Touching every aspect of our daily lives, public administration includes the continuous processes, routines, actions, behaviours, and discretionary decisions that rank and file bureaucrats operating at the 'street level' exercise on a day-to-day basis. Public administration, therefore, involves much more than the authoritative actions undertaken by higher level public officials. Indeed millions of public administrators serve in areas related to civic planning, public transportation, budgeting, policy evaluation,

election monitoring and oversight, law enforcement and fire, as well as social services ranging from healthcare to unemployment assistance and job retraining. As indicated by the faculty member to the prospective student attending the college fair, public administrators serve in positions ranging from the president or prime minister of a country and the members of their cabinets all the way down to local municipal parking enforcement officers.

The interaction among public authorities and agencies involved in the governing process is highly complex. America's relatively fragmented administrative system, for example, is comprised of a national government that shares governing responsibility and authority with fifty state governments and nearly 90,000 other units operating at the county, municipal, and district levels. Staffed with millions of public administrators, America's enormous public sector provides essential services to its citizens, ranging from public works and child protection to food safety and rehabilitation. Britain, by contrast, has possessed a relatively centralized system in which the national government delegates specific functions and mandates to various 'subnational' administrative divisions. Local administration in Britain is dispersed over 300 districts, which themselves are divided into metropolitan and non-metropolitan districts. These districts are overseen by mayors and district councils. Covering areas from public transport and housing all the way to public health and education, these agencies provide vital services. By its very nature, governance is intertwined with politics. Let us look at this in further detail.

The great political paradox

Over time the functions and mandates of public administrators have grown exponentially in response to citizen demands. The expectations placed on government to provide and manage ever-increasing amounts of publicly funded student loans and government resources to support small private businesses are

quintessential examples. The great paradox is that as citizens' demands and expectations for public sector services continue to grow, public satisfaction with 'government' seems simultaneously to decline. One well-known scholar even suggested that US citizens want to severely limit government from interfering in their private lives via higher taxes and security-related surveillance, while simultaneously insisting on increased government support to assist them when they deem it necessary. Indeed, public opinion polls in the US consistently confirm that most citizens hold negative views towards government, characteristically associating public bureaucracies with 'waste' and 'inefficiency'. America is not alone. In a CNN editorial on 11 June 2013, the Director of Global Economic Attitudes for the renowned Pew Research Center revealed that while nearly 75 per cent of Australian residents were satisfied with their personal economic circumstances, less than 50 per cent were satisfied with the direction of government. Dissatisfaction with 'government' and 'public bureaucrats' is a sentiment that is increasingly being echoed across many European countries as well.

Buzzwords like 'accountability', 'efficiency', and 'performance' have become the political rallying cries of the popular 'good governance' crusade that has been gaining traction across the globe. In recent times, right-of-centre political movements have echoed these themes to promote fiscal austerity and secure deep cuts in government resources. To some extent, these sentiments reflect growing public disenchantment with the way their governments have handled a series of high profile crises which have now become part of the reality of the global age. Terrorist attacks perpetrated by non-state actors or financial crises resulting from market failures (and massive system-wide fraud) may originate in one part of the world, but they can briskly spread from one country to the next, producing devastating effects that are often deeply felt at the national and local levels. Reflecting a view that their governments 'did not do enough to protect them' or

respond effectively afterwards, public attitudes towards government have grown increasingly negative. Though often originating well beyond their jurisdictional scope and control, citizens often find it politically convenient, and often personally consoling, to place the blame for such cataclysmic events on 'government bureaucrats' who, in their view, were 'asleep at the wheel'. Awkwardly, the massive cleanup often required in the aftermath of these events often falls on the shoulders of financially ever-strapped public authorities.

When politics and administration collide

A defining characteristic of both the field and practice of contemporary public administration involves the perpetually vexing question of where the politics of decision-making should end and where the politically neutral business of management and administration should take over. When the world of politics collides with administrative processes it can make for some intriguing drama. One of the most striking illustrations of this can be seen in a recent high stakes political face-off. On 1 October 2013, the world watched in bewilderment as for the first time in almost two decades the US government shut down. Resulting from a political impasse between the country's top political leaders in reaching a critical budget deal, the dramatic ordeal threatened to place the country's entire federal civil administration in limbo. Nearly one million public sector jobs were on the line as national parks, most federal offices, and the country's space programme were forced to close their doors. The negative fallout extended into the private sector as estimates surfaced suggesting that the closure was costing the economy nearly \$300 million a day in lost productive output, threatening to imperil the country's fragile economic recovery from the recent global financial crisis.

The seeds of the budget standoff were not planted in the administrative process itself but rather in a fierce political battle that was being waged by the country's two major political parties

over the decision to raise the debt ceiling in order to cover the massive \$33 billion shortfall in the 2014 budget. In the absence of decisive action, speculations began mounting that the American government would default on its sovereign debt obligations. Many feared that an extended showdown would ignite a firestorm of investor panic that would cause a meltdown of the entire global financial system. Investor fears were confirmed when Standard & Poor's, one of the most respected credit assessment agencies, lowered America's sovereign debt rating, potentially limiting the country's ability to borrow more money. With each passing day of the standoff, faith in the country's leadership and administrative capacity eroded.

How could it come to this? Politically speaking, there was plenty of finger pointing on both sides of the partisan aisle. Right-of-centre political party leaders in the legislature blamed the country's runaway debt problem on what they perceived to be the massive spending appetite of President Barack Obama and his left-leaning

Box 1 America's healthcare exchange

In 2010 American lawmakers passed the politically contentious Affordable Care Act (ACA). The historic Act established 'Health Insurance Exchanges' in 2013 that serve as marketplaces for consumers to purchase health insurance from a range of federally certified private vendors. The Act also allows states the option to establish their own exchanges, establish regional cooperatives with other states, or partner with the Federal government. The processes involved in setting up and managing healthcare enrolment websites posed enormous challenges for state administrators. During the initial phase of their launch, five of the fourteen states that set up their own health exchanges were projected to spend nearly a quarter of a billion dollars to fix problems embedded in the enrolment websites.

political supporters. Opposition leaders viewed the budget standoff as an opportunity to negotiate for deep cuts in social spending. Meanwhile the American president accused his political opponents of holding the budget process hostage in a conspiratorial effort to defund the country's historic Affordable Care Act, popularly known as 'Obamacare' (see Box 1). While a tenuous budget compromise was ultimately reached and a full-blown crisis averted, the sixteen-day standoff illustrates the extent to which party-based politics is inextricably connected with the policy and administrative process. It further illustrates how destructive partisan politics can disrupt an entire national administrative system.

Should government be run like a business?

Mounting political demands for 'austerity' in government spending have compelled public agencies to take on new mandates, functions, and tasks in the face of diminishing financial resources. In other words, public agencies at all levels are being forced to do 'more with less'. The insatiable quest for 'leaner and meaner' forms of public governance has compelled policymakers and public sector managers across national, regional, and municipal arenas to shift their emphasis increasingly from process-based practices towards 'economically rationalized' outcomes. Within the last thirty years, for example, public administrators have been challenged to adapt their processes and service delivery methods in order to meet quantitatively measured targets such as cost-benefit analysis and other performance-based benchmarks. Indeed, a major source of tension in public administration involves an ongoing conflict between the democratic values of 'equity' and 'equality', and the market values of 'performance' and 'efficiency'.

Negative attitudes towards the public sector are reflected through the growing sentiment that 'government is the problem and not the solution'. Such sentiments have inspired the popular mantra

that 'government should be run like a business'. One of the leading vanguards of this movement was British prime minister (1979-90), Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher believed that the growth of public spending in Britain was largely attributed to the 'uncontrollable' growth of government. Consequently she loathed the idea of increasing taxes to finance bloated state bureaucracies. The view that the private sector 'does it better' is shared by Britain's current prime minister, David Cameron, who recently stated that 'outside of the area of national security public services should be open to a range of providers competing to offer a better service'. While the joint activities of government and business are essential to a well-functioning society, applying the business logic of efficiency (in order to maximize profitability) to the public sector fails to acknowledge that the purpose and function of each of the two sectors are fundamentally distinct. Simply put, the public sector exists to provide 'public goods' or those services society as a whole pays for and from which no one can be excluded. This includes such indispensable items as public education and public highways. The private sector, by way of contrast, provides goods and services that are privately sold and consumed by individuals in the marketplace.

Questioning the appropriateness of applying business rationales to the public sector, economist John T. Harvey argues that 'not everything that is profitable is of social value and not everything of social value is profitable'. Harvey brings out, for example, that while many privately sold and consumed items, such as reality television or pornography, may be highly profitable in the private marketplace, they provide little social value in contributing to a well-functioning society. On the other hand, essentials such as military defence, public safety, and universal education often provide enormous social value without netting immediate cash returns to the citizens who pay for them.

Under the appropriate circumstances, the public sector may adopt certain private-sector-based management strategies and practices

with great success. However, one must keep in mind that government agencies and the public administrators who serve in them, unlike businesses, must be accountable to those with a much wider set of constituent interests, and they are overseen by other governmental agencies. Therefore, handing over control of public sector processes and services (see Box 2), such as the management of the department of motor vehicle records or official court documents, to the private sector for file processing and storage management can potentially compromise citizens' privacy rights. Moreover, outsourcing these essential functions to private hands can move them beyond the scope of democratic accountability and oversight.

United in their contempt for the public sector and its historic mission of redistributing wealth through progressive taxation in order to fund social services, America's Tea Party leaped onto the national scene in 2009 with a bellicose anti-government campaign directed against Obama's 'big government' economic

Box 2 The Railtrack privatization debacle

The popular sentiment that 'the private sector is always more efficient than the public sector' is countered by some high profile botched privatizations. Publicly run British Rail, for instance, was split up and sold on the cheap to private investors in the 1980s. Under the new arrangement, the private firm Railtrack oversaw the track, signals, and station operations, while passenger service was assumed by twenty-eight separate companies. The privatization formula involved breaking up an integrated publicly run transportation network into more than a hundred separate private companies and subcontractors. As a result, Britain was left with a highly fragmented system which failed to provide essential supervision over vital traffic safety equipment. This resulted in a series of catastrophic collisions, which ultimately left thirty people dead and nearly 400 more injured.

recovery package and national healthcare scheme. The group included members belonging to the so called 'right-wing' of the Republican Party such as senators Jim DeMint of South Carolina and Ted Cruz of Texas as well as Congressional representatives such as Michele Bachmann of Minnesota and Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee. Soon after it appeared, anti-government populist movements with varying agendas began sprouting up around the globe. Ranging from 'hard right' to more extreme fascist movements, examples include the UK's Independence Party (UKIP), Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD), and Greece's Golden Dawn.

Public administration and global turbulence

As we discussed earlier, global climate change and global terrorism are posing enormous challenges for public administrators operating at every level of government. Local public administrators in countries all over the world must be adept at managing crises that have originated outside their borders. Rapid global industrialization and urbanization, which appear to go hand in hand, have posed historic challenges for local public administrators, compelling them to expand their scope of responsibilities and areas of expertise. Indeed, many of the world's leading metropolitan areas are confronting major administrative dilemmas posed by untenable surges in urban density and urban sprawl. Public administrators are challenged to come up with effective solutions as existing infrastructure and civic resources are quickly being overwhelmed. Rising levels of carbon-based industrial pollution associated with aggressively expanding global production have been linked with recent increases in both the frequency and intensity of climate-change-related natural disasters. These events, in turn, have been wreaking havoc on large municipal areas, creating massive dilemmas for local administrators. Let us look briefly at a few examples of how some of the forces associated with globalization have been affecting local public administration.

In the United States, municipal administrators are mandated as the first responders to any natural disaster or threat to public safety. When essential coordination and communication among national and local administrators is wanting during a crisis or emergency, the results can be catastrophic, as evidenced by the administrative debacle that followed in the wake of the natural disaster known as Hurricane Katrina. In the summer of 2005, what began as a Category One hurricane miles out to sea quickly transformed into a 125-mile-an-hour force of nature that ravaged the Southern Louisiana coast. Unrelenting rainfall and extreme winds battered the surrounding areas of the city of New Orleans, leaving 80 per cent of the municipal area under water (see Figure 1). While most urban neighbourhoods had been successfully evacuated before the hurricane made landfall, many residing in the outlying rural parishes were left behind to fend for themselves. As water levels continued to rise, adjacent canal levees began overflowing, eventually giving way and adding perilously to the



1. New Orleans underwater.

deluge. With water levels reaching as high as 15 feet in some areas, local, state, and federal administrators and officials quickly realized that relief plans and resources currently in place were grossly insufficient. When the hurricane itself finally subsided and the waters began to recede, the damage was surveyed. Bone-chilling estimates revealed the sobering reality: almost 300 lives had been lost in the initial disaster and many more people would die in the subsequent flooding or while waiting for help that never arrived. Millions more were injured, displaced, or left homeless. There were billions of dollars in property damage.

As the world would soon witness, however, the real tragedy lay in a massively botched emergency response effort that would come to symbolize 'government ineffectiveness' and 'incompetence'. Indeed, a 2006 government report would later confirm that 'federal, state, and local officials' failure to anticipate the post-landfall conditions delayed post-landfall evacuation and support'. Confusing guidelines distinguishing a 'normal disaster' from a 'catastrophe' coincided with the failure of officials at all levels to identify and communicate the severity of the flooding. Confusion and poor communication delayed the implementation of critical evacuation measures for almost twenty-four hours after the levees had been breached. Leading public administration expert Donald Kettl later remarked that 'when faced with Katrina, government at all levels failed' and that 'the bungled response ranks as perhaps the biggest administrative failures in American History'.

Virtually all communication service was knocked out in the flooding, leaving administrators and relief agents operating at multiple levels of government without any means of talking to one another on the ground for nearly four days. Even worse, no contingency protocols had been put in place in the event that the main lines should fail. The country's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) director, Michael Brown, was left out of discussions between the state's governor's office and the city mayor's office. Meanwhile, the chief of the Homeland Security

Department, Michael Chertoff, failed to provide the Bush administration with 'adequate advice and counsel' on how to proceed, thereby delaying federal assistance. Hurricane Katrina provides a classic example of how a natural disaster, coupled with administrative folly, ultimately could culminate in a historic catastrophe. Public outrage resulted in a fundamental rethinking of the nation's emergency relief process. Subsequent disaster relief efforts would involve substantial improvements in the level of coordination between various administrative agencies.

Let us now look at how overcrowding in some of the world's largest cities associated with global industrialization is creating confounding challenges for local government administrators across the world. Massive industrial urban-based growth in India, for example, has been a mixed blessing for the country. On the one hand, this has contributed to a substantial increase in the country's overall gross domestic product, while on the other, it has generated administrative nightmares for public officials in cities like Mumbai who have been unable to successfully manage the massive levels of sewage and solid waste that are being generated daily by that city's thirteen million residents. Dramatic images depicting life for the millions living in urban slums provide us with a glimpse of the intractability of the growing problem.

Urban planners in Shanghai, China, are working feverishly to address the epic urban density challenges posed by massive waves of migrant workers who have been steadily pouring into cities from rural areas in search of industrial employment (see Figure 2). So-called 'satellite towns', which have been springing up around major urban centres like Beijing, have been absorbing some of the growth, thereby easing some of the pressure on the municipal centres. However, an unrelenting stream of new residents in those areas is quickly overburdening existing utilities and transportation facilities. Even China's more remote cities have been experiencing population explosions of their



2. Urban density challenges.

own. With an exponentially growing population, the relatively obscure southwestern city of Kunming, for example, stands to overtake in population size some of America's largest cities within the next few years. Turning our attention to the southern hemisphere, Melbourne's civic officials, business leaders, and urban planners are struggling to address the new infrastructure and social service needs of its ever-growing population which is expected to balloon to an estimated five million residents by 2025 and almost six and a half million by 2050. Fuelled by new waves of immigrants pouring in from all over the world, especially Asia, Melbourne's population is expected to grow by 1,200 residents a week for the next four decades, requiring major planning initiatives to address new demands placed on the city's education, health, water, and transportation facilities. According to the Property Council of Australia, these new requirements are expected to include an 'extra 10,000 childcare spots by 2025 and 29,000 by 2050, about 3350 new hospital beds by 2025 and 8600 by 2050 and 5700 new classrooms by 2025 and 10,000 by 2050'.

As we can already see, public administration is a highly complex and dynamic subject that is interconnected with modern life. At the same time, we have only scratched the surface at this point in our story. Returning to the question raised by the prospective student at the outset of this chapter, we might say that public administration is the intersection of politics, policy, and management, and concerns the design and adoption of government policies and programmes. Most importantly, it involves the management and leadership required to carry them out. Stated simply, public administration encompasses the wide range of political and management processes required to implement 'public policy' in the real world. As we continue our tour we will explore the relationship between public administration as both a professional practice and a related academic discipline. As we shall see in the further pages of this volume, the two are inextricably related, highly fluid, and dynamic. The academic field is devoted to teaching public managers how to improve functions and operations of government organizations in carrying out their mandates. The goal of those teaching public administration is to help public managers hone their critical thinking skills in ways that will make them worthy 'custodians of the public trust'. Indeed, democracy depends on it.

That said, before one can begin to grasp the role that public administrators play in today's complex world one must attempt to understand the evolution of the modern state and the ever-shifting roles and functions of the public sector within it. The access to virtually unlimited sources of information at breakneck Internet speeds has empowered citizens to think and question what public servants do in their name. While questions may abound over who should be responsible for ensuring the quality and accuracy of this information, the notion of 'transparency' is fuelling hopes for the expansion of democratic accountability where it exists and its extension to areas where it has not yet taken root. The management of globally sourced information is presenting major challenges for public administrators.

Public sector agencies across the globe have been responding to these new imperatives by searching for innovative ways to increase their organizational 'capacity'. Consequently, today's public administrator is compelled to adopt flexible strategies and practices to cope with ever-changing political and economic landscapes. In many public agencies, new broods of highly skilled 'public sector professionals' are being groomed to replace the old image of the 'bureaucrat'. As a result, it should come as no surprise that student enrolments in public administration programmes are exploding in places like the US, Britain, Europe, and all the way to China and Australasia.