Yes Minister: Ministers and Civil Servants need to Sort Out Their Relative Authority

The Yes Minister television sitcom that became a Textbook

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It is inevitable in parliamentary democracies that there will be tensions between elected ministers, who usually serve for only relatively short periods of a few years, and civil servants who often work in government for their entire careers. While a new minister arrives full of new ideas and policies from his political party's manifesto, civil servants have continuing expertise both in the formulation and implementation of policies and expect to be able to influence and, maybe even, control what happens.

Even in the best run and most stable democracies, civil servants always test a new minister to see how malleable and easy to influence he will be. If they consider him to be too over-confident or autocratic, they will find ways to trip him up and reduce his self-confidence. On the other hand, civil servants also like to be given clear policy briefs and can respond well to a minister who wants to work with them as a leader but not a dictator.

These strains and cross-currents were vividly illustrated by a popular British television series, *Yes Minister*, that began in 1980 and became internationally famous, running in various formats including books and a stage play over 33 years. In India, the series was so popular and rang so many bells (though the relationships there are much more complex than in Britain) that it was adapted with the same plots and the literal translation *Ji Mantriji*.

If *Yes Minister* was adapted for Bhutan, the secretary at the top of a ministry might greet his new minister, saying in flattering but bland and imprecise terms, 'Gross National Happiness, Minister? Well yes of course and your happiness is our prime concern, both for me as your Permanent Secretary and my young colleague here who is your Principal Private Secretary. And we are fully seized of the need to spread national happiness throughout the land'.

That was how the television series began (with civil service reform as the main policy issue) as Sir Humphrey Appleby, the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Administrative Affairs, welcomed his new Cabinet Minister, the Rt. Hon. James (Jim) Hacker, MP, to his office and introduced the new minister to the realities of Whitehall, which is the bureaucratic centre of the British government.

'We are just here to help you formulate and implement your policies,' the top civil servant would say in the Bhutan version. 'We are fully seized of the need for GNH. It has of course the backing of His Majesty, and we have taken it on board'. The minister would inevitably be flattered and impressed to find such apparently cooperative bureaucrats, especially when he discovered that they had researched his previous speeches and published articles. He would be most surprised when he was handed draft proposals for a White Paper called 'Towards a Happy Nation', though he would quickly discover that, while the proposals were superficially impressive, various delaying tactics had been surreptitiously built in.

Yes Minister was, and still is, a textbook on how the machinery of government works in the sort of parliamentary systems that operate in Bhutan and India as well as the UK and many other countries. The civil servants remain in their posts and switch to serving new political masters when there is a change of government. They thus have the power of knowledge and experience, gained over many years, that the politicians often lack and they also bond together to keep the politicians in check. In a new democracy like Bhutan—and even in established systems, for example the states in India—they have an even greater responsibility to explain and guide new ministers, who have no prior experience of government, about how the machinery of government such as audits and legal requirements work. A minister, pressured by his constituency, often wants things done immediately and gives his instructions verbally, which the civil servant has to answer for later when auditors find that processes have been skipped.

'It wasn't a comedy, it was a documentary!', says Sir James Bevan, till recently Britain's Delhi-based Ambassador for Bhutan, echoing what his colleagues in London have said: 'It's not a documentary but a training manual'.

And so *Yes Minister* was, as it tracked the minister's accident-prone career through twenty-one episodes from 1980 to 1982 and then, with *Yes Prime Minister,* when he improbably attained that office from 1986 to 1988, with sixteen episodes. That was followed by a shorter new run in 2013. The same civil servants accompanied the minister throughout the series, with the top bureaucrat constantly trying to remain

superior and in charge, while the younger private secretary was torn between loyalty to his immediate but not permanent political boss and to the senior civil servants who controlled the future of his career.

On that first day, the top civil servant continued his introduction: 'I am your Permanent Under Secretary of State, known as the Permanent Secretary. Woolley here is your Principal Private Secretary…Directly responsible to me are ten Deputy Secretaries, 87 Under-Secretaries and 250 assistant Secretaries. Then there are plain private secretaries reporting to them. The Prime Minister will be appointing two Parliamentary Under Secretaries and you will be appointing your own Parliamentary Private Secretary'.

Having explained the civil service structure in blindingly confusing precision—a hallmark of a successful mandarin as these senior officials are known in Whitehall—the minister was equipped with red despatch boxes full of policy and other papers to read over the weekend. He rapidly discovered that the civil service kept him so busy with papers and meetings that he rarely managed to get round to his own policies for reform and that, when he did, the civil servants would blandly and skilfully undermine and evade them with irritating charm, generalisations, and obfuscation.

Ultimately of course, the minister has to take responsibility for his decisions and cannot pass that responsibility off to the bureaucrats. But it is the civil service's responsibility—and the prime minister's—to ensure that proper decisions are taken and that ministers do not do things to benefit for example their constituencies and their friends—as often happens in India and elsewhere.

Politicians loved the series. Margaret Thatcher, who was Britain's famous 'iron lady' Prime Minister during the 1980s, used to say it was her 'favourite show', even though its early episodes were written before she came to power and thus reflected the mood of the previous Labour government. She told *The Daily Telegraph*, a leading British newspaper, which is supported by her party, that 'its clearly-observed portrayal of what goes on in the corridors of power has given me hours of pure joy'. She even performed a short sketch, with the two lead actors unwillingly in attendance, reading a dreadful script that she had either written or inspired.

Bureaucrats, however, were not so sure about the series and the civil service swung into defensive action. Aiming, it seems, to scare or at least box in the series' joint scriptwriters, the chairman of Britain's Inland Revenue invited them to lunch at his headquarters after three episodes had been televised. In true *Yes Minister* style, he

said he loved the series, but his colleagues grilled the authors about their sources of information and even offered help if they needed to check information.

A political friend, who had worked in Downing Street and was advising on the plots, was horrified. ‘The Inland Revenue is Whitehall’s police force. Didn’t you know? They were trying to find out what you know and where you’re getting your information’, she said a few hours after the lunch. One of the authors was then hit with a three-year audit of his tax affairs, which was clearly meant to scare him off being too controversial. Fortunately however, he had always resisted temptations to dodge taxes so the Inland Revenue was unable to trap him.

The book’s plots were soundly based. The political friend had been a former prime minister’s political secretary, and a second adviser had been the chief policy advisor. The plots and the tensions between the politicians and civil servants were not therefore invented as fiction by the authors, but were based on what had actually happened.

The main inspiration was even more impressive. It came from *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, a bestseller written by Richard Crossman, one of Britain’s most respected politicians of that era, about his time in the Labour government from 1964 to 1970. Some scenes were lifted straight from the book, including Crossman being told how to cope with huge piles of letters in his in-tray. ‘If he doesn’t want to reply himself, all he has to do is to move them over to the out-tray and the civil service will take care of them’, his private secretary said, revealing one of the ways that the civil service maintains control.

The minister in the TV series started his period in office firmly believing in ‘Open Government’, and the civil service gave the White Paper they drafted for him that title because, the top civil servant said in a revealing aside, ‘you always dispose of the difficult bit in the title’. He then revealingly added: ‘It is the law of Inverse Relevance: the less you intend to do about something, the more you keep talking about it’. The minister was quickly weaned off his dream when the civil service made sure he accidently discovered about a politically embarrassing secret that he would not want publicised. Computer display terminals that could have been made in Britain had been bought abroad and that would have caused a scandal, so the minister had to agree that it should not be announced. So much for Open Government!

The same trend continued with an episode that revealed how the two sides score off each other. The minister is tripped up on the ‘need to know’ and he then trips up the

civil servant and wins the tussle. The phones of an official at the Ministry of Defence were being tapped because he was leaking secrets to the French. The minister had not been told about the tapping and said, when asked in Parliament, that no tapping was taking place. That was clearly untrue and could have led him to having to resign because he had in effect lied in Parliament, which is an unforgiveable constitutional offence. But he forced the bureaucrats to protect him by obtaining a tape of wildly indiscreet remarks the top civil servant had made about unemployment when he thought the microphone had been turned off in a broadcasting studio.

These games are not however the way that the civil service is supposed to behave. 'The deal in the UK is this—officials must always and everywhere speak truth unto power (i.e. ministers)', Lord Hennessy, professor of contemporary British history at London University and an independent member of the House of Lords, has told me. 'But once ministers have decided something, officials must carry out the policy loyally and energetically'.

Yes Minister demonstrates how the civil service manages to get round that requirement. 'Overall, it showed that government is a special kind of marriage between two tribes—the ministerial class and the career officials with the special advisers as a complicating factor', says Hennessy, adding in the political advisors who try to help the ministers beat back the civil service.

Throughout the years, *Yes Minister* has retained the top spot among political television series, perhaps because the characters themselves were and are still so outrageously and unintentionally funny and because, despite all the intrigue and apparent incompetence, one gets the impression that the government was functioning.

Beyond that, it serves as a textbook on how governments operate—not how they should, but how they do—and that poses the challenge for Bhutan. How will its elected ministers and career civil servants work out their relationships, with each respecting the other's roles, and working together for the good of the country?