

Part 3: The civil service

The chapters in this section explore further the relationship between politics and administration, and the concept of ‘merit’—the subject of a symposium arising from the 2013 Dialogue workshop published in the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* (Volume 74, Issue 3). China’s ancient system of civil service examinations (intellectual selection by writing abilities) long predates the emergence of a professional civil service in Western democracies following the 1854 Northcote–Trevelyan Report in the UK, the 1881 Pendleton Act and 1886 Woodrow Wilson lecture in the US, and the translated writings of Max Weber on bureaucracy and political sociology. The PRC’s approach does not follow the Westminster model of a neutral, professional service loyal to but separate from the political leadership (and similar to the system operating in the US but with some intentional senior level politicisation), but merges the administrative and political through its cadre system and the party-state. Taiwan has established a neutral, professional civil service since the democratisation reforms in the 1990s drawing heavily on the traditional examinations system and retaining features, such as appointment to levels rather than to jobs, that differ from the main Westminster approaches.

The earlier symposium revealed not only how the concept of merit varies across the three jurisdictions, but also that it is not constant in any jurisdiction: it evolves over time. The chapters here explore how the civil service in each jurisdiction is continuing to evolve. They confirm the very different approaches used, most sharply between those in the PRC and those in Australia. But interestingly they also reveal how the civil service in these two jurisdictions both seem to be facing increased political pressures that may be curbing their capability.

Shuo Chen and **Hon Chan** review the PRC’s ‘political meritocracy’ approach, which aims to strike a balance between administrative rationality and political prerogatives, drawing in part on Confucian concepts. Since 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has inserted meritocratic principles into cadre selection. Deng Xiaoping strengthened these to ensure cadres were ‘both red and expert’. More recently, political and meritocratic indicators have been articulated in five dimensions of cadre evaluation, aimed to promote job performance as well as political and ideological standards. While politics and administration remain entwined, two different career paths have emerged—a political realm for political appointees and an administrative realm for career appointees. Although not all civil servants are party members, it is likely all principal and high-level civil servants are, and the CCP’s ‘nomenklatura’ system maintains close control of the political

realm. In the administrative realm, the CCP relies on the Civil Service Law to apply meritocratic measures, providing predictability to management and enhancing administrative capacities.

There are of course tensions in such a system, with problems of political patronage and abuse of power and the risk of focusing on recruitment and selection with insufficient attention to the skills necessary for managing the job. The current emphasis under Xi Jinping is on centralised party control but new circumstances and opportunities may later revive the importance of managerial capacity and bureaucratic rationalism.

Bennis So and **Chih-Wei Hsieh** provide an account of the development of Taiwan's civil service under democratisation since the 1990s, with a comparison between current arrangements and Hong Kong's postcolonial civil service. Much of Taiwan's approach originated in Republican China under Sun Yat-sen, particularly the establishment of an Examination Yuan as an independent arm of government to check against the executive's personal authority (and prevent nepotism and sinecures). With democratisation, the civil service was depoliticised and legally protected from political interference, spearheaded by the Examination Yuan. New public management influenced Taiwan's reforms from the early 2000s, leading to the introduction of performance management at the organisational level, but recruitment and promotion were still based on levels, not positions, all positions remain permanent and individual appraisal has failed to take hold. A survey of street-level civil servants in Taiwan and Hong Kong in 2019 (amid Hong Kong's civil disruptions) reveals that Hong Kong seems to have a higher degree of meritocracy with better links to job requirements, but Taiwan's civil servants are slightly more aligned to their organisations' values and culture, and experience more professional autonomy and ability to respond to citizens. So and Hsieh conclude that democratisation has led directly to improvements in civil service performance in Taiwan, protected from political interference but still responsive to the public.

Andrew Podger and **John Halligan** draw on major reviews of the Australian Public Service (APS) over the last decade to assess its current capability. While the APS is more highly educated than ever, has been largely successful in pursuing equal employment opportunity, makes better use of technology and draws more on external expertise than previously, the reviews have identified serious concerns including: loss of capability in strategic policy advising and human resource management; leadership deficiencies; a failure to build on improvements in financial management over previous decades

or to adequately address risk management; and insufficient investment in digital capacity. These weaknesses reflect the impact of three major themes in public service development not only in Australia but also in other Anglophone countries: politicisation, managerialism and externalisation. The APS as an institution has suffered in particular from excessive politicisation and excessive use of external consultants and contractors. While some action was taken by the previous government in response to the latest (Thodey) review, key recommendations concerning the underlying problems were rejected. That said, trust in the APS by both the government and the public increased significantly during the response to COVID 19. The new government elected in May 2022 has promised to revisit the Thodey recommendations that had been rejected, but it is too early to assess whether this will successfully rebuild the capability of the civil service.

Key conclusions to draw from the chapters in this section include:

- The importance of civil service capability and performance;
- The diffusion of new public management ideas not only to democratic Taiwan but also to authoritarian PRC, but with ideas that have been adapted considerably to fit into the respective institutional frameworks;
- The Australian case demonstrates that those ideas have had their downsides as well as their benefits, and need to be recalibrated if civil service capability is to be protected and enhanced to meet emerging challenges;
- Increased political control presents a serious risk to capability in both the PRC and Australia (and probably Taiwan as well).

Civil service developments are intimately associated with the financial management emphasis on performance discussed in the previous section, and are also directly relevant to the challenges of service delivery explored in the following section.

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