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COPING WITH COMPETING NORMS BY LOCAL GOVERNMENT BUREAUCRATS IN PENANG, MALAYSIA: SOME LESSONS ON THE RECEIVED RESPONSIBILITY OF BUREAUCRATS.

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Artikel ini merupakan usaha permulaan kami dalam menyelidik tanggungjawab yang diterima ('received responsibility") oleh anli birokrat di Malaysia. Kami kenalpasti empat model yang utama mengenai tanggungjawab birokrat, lalu mengkaji secara empirik sejauhmanakah model-model tersebut diterima oleh ahli birokrat di Majlis Perbandaran Pulau Pinang. Kami dapati bahawa tanggungjawab yang diterima tidaklah terhad kepada mana-mana satu model sahaja dan merupakan suatu campuran pelbagai model. Hal ini dibincang dan beberapa pelajaran dikenalpasti bagi memahami amalan tanggungjawaboleh ahli birokrat.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

This paper is about the political responsibility of bureaucrats in democratic government. We use the term bureaucrats to distinguish them from politicians in office. Administrators, public servants or civil servants would do just as well. Public managers may be a more fashionable term these days, but it describes politicians in office no less than bureaucrats: who would deny that ministers as political heads of departments are public managers as well? We also use the traditional term of responsibility, as it will do just as well as comparable terms like duty, morality or ethics. The major question about the responsibility of bureaucrats concern their proper relation to the sovereign people and the ruling politicians who represent the people in a democracy, or the set of norms that should govern that relation; and it is on this that we shall focus. We are concerned, in other words, with the political responsibility rather than the functional responsibility of bureaucrats (see Friedrich, 1940, 1960).

The political responsibility of bureaucrats has increased in importance with their increasing role in government. The neat division of functions between

politicians and bureaucrats, according to which the former determine policy and the latter implement it, has been universally rejected, largely as a result of increasing involvement by bureaucrats in policy formulation. At the level of local government, which we examine in this paper, this has been amply shown in various studies (for example, Morgan and Kass, 1993, Svara, 1999). Our own findings (not included here) show that this is no less true in Penang, where politicians in office, i.e. councillors, have other full-time occupations. This has raised the question of whether and how this increasing policy involvement by non-elected bureaucrats can be reconciled with democratic government. The responsibility of bureaucrats has thus become a focus of concern and attention among students of democratic government. The enforcement of responsibility by means of external controls on bureaucrats is obviously important and has received the bulk of scholarly attention. However, the problem of defining the responsibility of bureaucrats still remains. That is to say, even when those *to* whom bureaucrats are responsible possess the means of enforcement, the question still remains as to what bureaucrats are to be held responsible *for*. At issue are the norms or values for guiding (and evaluating) the performance by bureaucrats of their policy role.

It is debatable whether this evident need for an adequate and workable normative theory for the guidance of bureaucrats under democratic government has ever been satisfactorily met. What is certain, however, is that the situation has become more complicated and challenging in recent decades. Facing up to the policy role of modern bureaucrats, academics have assigned new duties to bureaucrats, even to the extent of adding the pursuit and defense of the public interest to the latter's other responsibilities. Ruling politicians in many countries are demanding more of bureaucrats, including greater enthusiasm and support for the policies of the party in power. And the public, which is everywhere becoming more organized and vocal, is demanding greater transparency and direct responsiveness to its interests. The responsibility of bureaucrats has increased both in urgency and complexity under these conditions.

Writers from Barnard (1938: ch. 17) to Waldo (1980: ch. 7) and Cooper (1998) have recognized that bureaucrats are subject to multiple and conflicting political and other moral expectations. Morgan and Kass (1993) indicate the two main lines of scholarly response to this situation. While they stress the need to "focus our energies on providing career administrators with a moral framework ... that enables them to articulate a complex ordering of moral claims that are compatible with our constitutional system of government." (p. 187), their work represents another kind of worthwhile inquiry that is empirical rather than prescriptive in nature. How do bureaucrats actually respond to, or cope with, the various normative expectations or pressures facing them? Or what kinds of

normative ideas and ideals do they accept as proper guides to their practice? In this paper we seek to examine empirically the manner in which bureaucrats actually resolve the normative issues about their role and define their own responsibility. In other words, we want to ascertain what may be called the received responsibility of bureaucrats.

The received responsibility of bureaucrats at a given time or place, as Simon (1985) says generally of social conditions or states, is contingent and cannot be known *a priori* but only through empirical research. Finding out the received responsibility of bureaucrats is clearly important because of its consequentialness for policy outputs. As one writer on administrative ethics has long noted, "it is obvious that the moral standards which enter into the day to day conduct of public business leave their mark on the whole working approach of the executive branch. That is true even when these standards are ill-defined, or inconsistent with one another, or actually incompatible with the logic of the constitutional order (Marx, 1949: 1120). Obviously, the received responsibility of bureaucrats must be ascertained before it can be evaluated and its need for improvement assessed. Understanding received responsibility can also inform the normative task of prescribing for bureaucrats.

THE STUDY

We are presently engaged in a study of the received responsibility of Malaysian bureaucrats. This paper presents our preliminary findings from a questionnaire administered to senior bureaucrats in the Penang Island Municipal Council. Interviews were also conducted with several bureaucratic heads of departments but the results do not modify the main findings of the questionnaire reported here.

By senior bureaucrats we mean all heads of departments and their immediate subordinates, i.e. the two levels of bureaucrats in the departments that interact most with ruling politicians or councillors. This yielded a total of 21 bureaucrats from the 9 departments. Departments are generally technical in nature and are mostly headed as well as staffed at senior levels by persons trained in relevant professions.

The Penang Island Municipal Council consists of 24 councillors (excluding the president). Of this number, 2 are District Officers (federal bureaucrats) serving in the state. The 22 politicians from the component parties of the ruling National Front consist of 2 from the Malaysian Indian Congress, 4 from the Malaysian Chinese Association, 7 from the Malaysian People's Movement (or *Gerakan*) and 9 from the United Malays National Organization. Thus no

component party has a majority in the Council. Councillors work through committees, of which there are about ten, with each councillor sitting in four to six committees.

Since the abolition of local elections in the sixties, councillors have been appointed from among member parties of the ruling coalition in the elected state government (see generally Norris, 1980). This departure from the more usual practice of direct election does not vitiate the usefulness of Malaysian local governments as a venue for investigating the responsibility of bureaucrats in relation to ruling politicians. Councillors remain the ruling politicians in Malaysian local governments, and council or local bureaucrats are subordinated to them, even though they (i.e. councillors) are, as one of them puts it, indirectly rather than directly elected.

FOUR BASIC MODELS OF BUREAUCRATIC RESPONSIBILITY

Our investigation is guided and structured by four basic models of the political responsibility of bureaucrats. These models are readily discernable as the dominant extant models of bureaucratic responsibility in the relevant normative literature of public administration. They are normative because they impose requirements on bureaucrats. They deserve to be called models because they impose requirements on various important dimensions of the role (including role relations) of bureaucrats and also because the requirements of each model are internally consistent.

We provide below a brief description of these models. Not all of these models are fully or consensually specified in the existing literature. Nor is the potential conflict among them adequately confronted and resolved. However, it suffices for our present purposes to state the essential or distinguishing features of each of the models. Broadly speaking, these models also trace a developmental sequence in the development of ideas on the subject of bureaucratic responsibility. A later model was developed primarily in response to the perceived weakness of an earlier one -- without, however, completely displacing it or resulting in the total rejection of the earlier model. Indeed, each model has its own particular merits (as well as demerits), which is why support for each remains and fluctuates over time and according to political conditions (Aberbach and Rockman, 1994).

The first and earliest model may be called the partisan model, as it requires bureaucrats to be partisan (or "responsive") to ruling politicians (Riggs, 1971; Rourke, 1992, 1997; Aberbach and Rockman, 1994). Bureaucrats are servants of ruling politicians and are expected to further the interests of politicians and

the political party in power. This paramount concern pervades and colours all dimensions of the bureaucrat's role, whether in providing policy advice, implementing policies or communicating with the public.

In contrast, the neutral model enjoins bureaucrats to be neutral in relation to ruling politicians – in the sense that they should give equal service to whoever happens to be in power. A reaction against the incompetence of bureaucrats appointed on the basis of partisan-political criteria or the spoils system, the doctrine of neutrality paves the way for appointing bureaucrats on performance-related criteria or merit. The neutral model requires bureaucrats to freely but confidentially express their views and tender their best advice on all relevant matters without regard to party and other loyalties, implement all policies faithfully according to established law and rules and regulations, maintain their anonymity and refrain from unauthorized comments and disclosures to the public. As in the partisan model, bureaucrats are responsible only to their political superiors, but what they are responsible for, or the content of their responsibility, clearly differs from the partisan model.

Displacing the partisan model in the later half of the nineteenth-century Britain following the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms (Brown, 1970: ch. 5), the neutral model was the received model that the British bequeathed, together with the parliamentary form of government, to its former colonies, including Malaysia. In the United States, the Pendleton Act of 1883 marked the triumph of neutrality over the partisan spoils system. However, in recent years political leaders in both Britain and the United States have exhibited tendencies of backpedaling towards the partisan model. In Malaysia too, government leaders have constantly expressed dissatisfaction with the passive neutrality of bureaucrats and demanded greater bureaucratic commitment to its policies as well as increased enthusiasm and energy in carrying out its programmes (Crouch, 1996: 133).

Whereas the above two models focus on the upward responsibility of bureaucrats to ruling politicians, the next two models – the pluralist and public-interest models -- require bureaucrats be responsible outward to citizens or the public. They are concerned with bureaucratic "responsiveness to the public" rather than "responsiveness to elected officials" (Selden, 1997: 32-34; see also Saltzstein, 1992; Moore, 1995). They differ, however, in the way the relevant public is defined.

The pluralist model sees the relevant public as consisting of interest groups that are concerned with a public decision. Bureaucrats should therefore not only consult and listen to interest groups but also seek decisions that enjoy the widest possible agreement among affected interest groups. According to Morrow

(1987: 165), decisions that "reflect the accommodation of multiple group pressures" are both more democratic than rule by the majority through its elected representatives and more likely to promote system stability. There is no consensus among pluralists, however, as to whether bureaucrats should be bound by, and hence defer to, interest-group consensus or agreement (Jordan, 1990).

The public-interest model takes a more inclusive view of the public than does the pluralist model and enjoins bureaucrats to use their participation in the policy process to safeguard and promote the public interest, which the model implies may not be adequately served by ruling politicians or interest groups in the political system (Jackson, 1988; Wamsley, et al., 1990). The concept of the public interest is fraught with definitional problems and for this reason has been an easy target of pluralist critics denying its existence. However, these critics may have been too eager to throw out the baby with the bathwater (Redford, 1958: ch. 5; Pennock, 1962; Stone, 1988: 14-16). Moreover, as noted by Marx above, moral standards can have effect even if they are poorly defined. Another problem is that the autonomous championing of the public or, for that matter, any interest by non-elected bureaucrats remains highly problematic in democratic ideology (Burke, 1986; 1989). Upward responsibility, neutrality and anonymity are all compromised by the bureaucrat's independent pursuit of the public interest. However, this *avant-garde* model continues to hold attraction for scholars because of dissatisfaction with bureaucratic partisanship and bureaucratic value-indifference under the neutral model -- or the fear that "the ethic of neutrality is no ethic at all" (Jackson, 1988: 367) – and the danger of capitulation to entrenched interests under the pluralist model.

An important feature of these models (and one that foreshadows our findings) is that they are not completely mutually exclusive, even though they are not completely compatible either. It is thus possible for bureaucrats to rely on more than one model in actual practice. This is why we describe them as basic and attempt to investigate the extent of their reception by bureaucrats – as well as entertain the hope that examining the actual practice of responsibility by bureaucrats may help us to better understand the relationship among the various models.

BUREAUCRATIC RECEPTION OF THE MODELS

Having explained the normative confusion facing bureaucrats and the four basic models of bureaucratic responsibility, we now examine whether and to what extent bureaucrats rely on each of these models. The data consists of the responses of our 21 bureaucrats to various statements expressing the major requirements of each model. The multiple statements for each model produce

highly consistent responses. Except for the pluralist model, the statements concern both beliefs and behaviour. Statements on belief refer to what bureaucrats should do, while statements on behaviour refer to what bureaucrats actually do. Our data shows that the responses to both kinds of statements are also generally consistent with each other. The questions on the pluralist model relate to beliefs only, largely because we were unsure (unnecessarily as it turned out) whether the council bureaucrats have any significant interactions with interest groups.

The Partisan Model

The partisan model is largely but not completely rejected. This finding is based on the data in Table 1.

Table 1
Responses to the Partisan Model

Statement	Responses					Aver Sc
	1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Neutral	4 Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree	
Beliefs						
1. Civil servants should be completely loyal to their political superiors and should do anything their political superiors ask them to.	0	2	6	6	7	3.8
2, Civil servants should always promote the interests of their political superiors and the ruling party.	0	3	4	10	4	3.
3. Civil servants are accountable (or answerable) to their political superiors and to no one else.	1	1	3	11	5	3.
4. Civil servants should not be completely neutral and impartial but must identify with the goals of political superiors and the ruling party.	1	5	8	3	4	3
Mean for Beliefs						

Statement	Responses 1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Neutral	4 Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree	Average Score
Behaviour						
Behaviour						
5. While advising councilors, I only provide views and information that support their policy preferences.	0	2	2	7	10	4.19
6. I implement all orders of councillors even if they are not lawful or against the public interest.	0	2	3	7	9	4.10
7. I only make public comments and disclose information that promotes public support for the councillors.	0	1	4	11	4	3.90
8. When providing policy formulation advice, I only consider the preferences of my superiors and nothing else.	0	0	5	7	9	4.19
Mean for Behaviour						**4.10**

The first four statements in Table 1 tap the normative beliefs of bureaucrats with respect to the partisan model. The response to the first two statements indicates that the partisan model is largely rejected. Statement 3, which states that bureaucrats are answerable to their political superiors only and to no one else, is ambiguous in that its acceptance would be consistent with both the partisan and neutral models. For this reason, and because the neutral model may find favour with our respondents, we expect responses to it to be less negative, or even not negative at all. Still, their response (average score: 3.86) is no less negative than their response to the first two statements. The overall mean of 3.66 for beliefs, indicating mild rejection of the partisan model, would have been higher but for the bureaucrats' greater ambivalence towards the last statement, compared to their reaction to the other three. Bureaucrats appear more normatively neutral than antagonistic (average score: 3.19) to the view, often urged by state and federal ruling politicians in Malaysia, that bureaucrats

"should not be completely neutral and impartial, but must identify with the ... goals of the ruling party." The Penang Island Municipal Council experienced mainly opposition rule in the days of elected local government, but since local elections were abolished in the mid-sixties, it has been in the hands of the same coalition that has also continuously controlled the federal and Penang state governments. If the reaction to statement 4 in the table indicates only a slight disagreement, this should perhaps not come as a surprise under these conditions. However, and more to the point, it is still a far cry from a clear normative embrace of partisanship.

With respect to behaviour, bureaucratic rejection of the partisan model is even more pronounced than is shown in their normative beliefs. Their responses to the four statements (with average scores ranging from 3.90 to 4.19) clearly show that bureaucrats do not see themselves as subservient to councillors. The overall mean for all four statements on behaviour is a clearly negative 4.10. All in all, we feel justified in concluding that the partisan model is largely rejected. It is not completely exorcised but it is a poor description of the received responsibility of our respondents.

The Neutral Model

The neutral model is largely but not completely received or accepted by bureaucrats, as can be seen in Table 2 (below).

The response to the belief statements (mean: 1.92) shows clear normative acceptance of the neutral model. The respondents report that their behaviour complies even more strongly with the neutral model. The requirements of the neutral model with respect to bureaucratic behaviour in policy advising, policy implementation, and public comments and information disclosure are reportedly strongly complied with by our respondents, yielding a mean of 1.53 for behaviour as a whole. Together, these scores constitute strong support for the neutral model by our respondents.

The model's requirement of sole accountability to political superiors is similar to that of the partisan model and has already been commented upon. That bureaucrats return close to a "disagree' verdict on their sole accountability to political superiors is a significant qualification of their reception of the neutral model. This qualification probably stems from the bureaucrats' support (to be shown shortly) for the models of outward responsibility, especially the public-interest model. We conclude that the neutral model is largely but not completed embraced by bureaucrats. Nonetheless, of all the models, the neutral model is clearly the dominant one accepted by bureaucrats in the Penang Island Municipal Council: their acceptance or reception of the neutral model, in terms

of both beliefs and behaviour, is higher than their reception of either the pluralist or the public interest models. Our respondents generally accept political direction, which they see as part and parcel of democracy; however, they strongly maintain the image of themselves as neutral professionals.

Table 2
Responses to the Neutral Model

Statement	Responses					Average Score
	1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Neutral	4 Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree	
Beliefs						
1. Civil servants should serve their political superiors to the best of their ability, but they must remain neutral and non-partisan.	8	11	2	0	0	1.71
2. Civil servants should never make public comments or disclose official information without prior permission from political superiors.	8	9	3	0	1	1.90
3. Civil servants should obey the orders of their political superiors only if the orders comply with existing law and regulations	6	11	1	1	2	2.14
Mean for Beliefs						**1.92**
Behaviour						
4. While advising, I provide views and information on all relevant matters, even if these do not coincide with the preferences of councilors.	11	7	2	1	0	1.67
5. I implement policies impartially and in accordance with rules and regulations.	10	11	0	0	0	1.52
6. I never make public comments or disclose official information without proper authorization.	14	6	0	0	0	1.30
Mean for Behaviour						**1.53**

The Pluralist Model

The pluralist model is moderately supported by our respondents but only with respect to interest group participation in the public decision-making process. Deference to interest groups in making public decisions is clearly rejected. This is the verdict of the data in Table 3.

Interest groups are not reported to be very active or powerful in influencing the operation of the various departments of the Penang Island Municipal Council. However, neither are they non-existent or totally ineffectual. Table 3 shows the responses to statements designed to evaluate reception of the pluralist model. Unlike those for other models, these statements concern beliefs alone. (Contrary to our initial uncertainty, we found that both councillors and bureaucrats constitute targets of interest group influence and have to deal with interest groups.) The table has two parts, one relating to attitudes toward (or evaluation of) interest groups with respect to their role in the policy process and the other relating to bureaucratic relations with interest groups in the same process. We expect our respondents' beliefs as to their proper relations with interest groups to be significantly influenced by their attitude toward interest groups.

Table 3
Responses to the Pluralist Model

Statement	Responses					Average Score
	1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Neutral	4 Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree	
Attitudes toward Interest Groups						
1. Interest groups in society have a right to take part in the formulation of policies that affect them.	10	10	1	0	0	1.57
2. Interest groups often understand public problems better than politicians and civil servants.	1	6	6	6	2	3.10
3. Interest groups are an important source of useful ideas for solving public problems.	4	14	2	1	0	2.00
4. The trouble with interest groups is that they usually pursue their own narrow interests at the expense of the public interest.	1	10	4	0	0	1.86

Statement	Responses					Average Score
	1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Neutral	4 Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree	
Relations with Interest Groups						
5. Civil servants should listen to, and establish good working relations with, interest groups in society.	4	13	3	1	0	2.05
6. Civil servants should share relevant information with interest groups to enable them to play a meaningful role in policymaking.	2	13	5	1	0	2.24
Attitudes toward Interest Groups						
7. Civil servants should explain their actions not only to political superiors but also to concerned groups in society.	3	10	4	4	0	2.42
8. The views of interest groups should be taken into account but must not be allowed to determine policy.	4	16	0	1	0	1.90
9. Civil servants should defend the public interest against the demands and claims of interest groups.	2	16	2	0	0	2.00

The first four statements in Table 3 concern what seems to us to be the important aspects of bureaucratic attitudes toward interest groups. The rather strongly worded first statement elicit responses (average score: 1.57) that clearly establish the legitimacy of interest group participation in the policy process. Our bureaucratic respondents strongly acknowledge the right of interest groups to participate in the formulation of policies that affect them. They also agree that interest groups "are an important source of useful ideas for solving public problems" (statement 3; average score: 2.00), thus acknowledging that the expertise that interest groups possess in their areas of concern can contribute importantly to effective policies and problem-solving. However, bureaucrats do not see interest groups as equally useful in the logically prior task of understanding and analyzing public problems. The statement that interest groups "understand public problems better than politicians and civil servants," produce only a neutral or ambivalent response (statement 2; average score: 3.10). Their attitude toward interest groups turn clearly negative when it comes to the kinds of interest typically pursued by

interest groups in the policy process. They show strong agreement with the statement that interest groups "pursue their own narrow interest at the expense of the public interest (statement 4; average score: 1.86). Our respondents are aware of both the positive and negative aspects of interest group involvement in the policy process: they can thus be said to have a generally balanced view of interest groups. This view is reflected in their beliefs on their proper relations with interest groups shown in the second part of Table 3.

Bureaucrats show mild support for the statements that they "should listen to, and establish good working relations with, interest groups" (statement 5; average score: 2.05), that they "should share relevant information with interest groups to enable them to play a meaningful role in policymaking" (statement 6; average score: 2.24), and that they "should explain their actions ... to concerned groups" (statement 7; average score: 2.42). All these actions indicate bureaucratic acknowledgement of the legitimate stake of interest groups and acceptance of interest groups as partners (although not necessarily equal partners) in the policy process. The belief of bureaucrats that they should perform these actions is not strong, but it is at least positive.

Accepting interest group participation in policymaking does not mean that bureaucrats believe they should defer to the demands or wishes of interest groups. Consistent with their perceived limitations of interest groups, bureaucrats clearly believe that the views of interest groups "should be taken into account but must not be allowed to determine policy" (statement 8; average score: 1.90). Furthermore, they also believe that they "should defend the public interest against the demands and claims of interest groups" (statement 9; average score: 2.00).

As noted earlier, current formulations of the pluralist model of bureaucratic responsibility are unclear as to whether bureaucrats should be bound by the agreement or consensus arrived at by interest groups. It may be useful to distinguish between a strong and a weak version of the pluralist model. The weak version only provides for interest group participation in administrative decision-making, while the strong version further requires that interest group consensus or agreement be binding on bureaucrats. Our bureaucratic respondents show mild acceptance of only the weak pluralist model: they accept participation by interest groups and consider their views but do not defer to them in public decision-making. This foreshadows our findings on their reception of the public interest model, for how else can bureaucrats (in contrast to ruling politicians) justify their right to vet and even reject interest group agreement except on the basis of some overriding notion of the public interest.

The Public-Interest Model

The data in Table 4 shows that the public-interest model receives moderate support from our respondents. They promote the public interest but subject to the avoidance of open conflict with political superiors.

Table 4
Responses to the Public-Interest Model

Statement	Responses 1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Neutral	4 Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree	Average Score
Beliefs						
1. I am answerable not only to political superiors but also to the general public.	4	12	2	0	3	2.24
2. Civil servants have a duty to expose wrongful acts committed by persons in public office, including their political superiors.	2	9	8	1	0	2.40
3. Civil servants should always serve the public interest even if it does not coincide with the interests of their political superiors.	4	12	4	1	0	2.10
4. Civil servants should consider the public and not their immediate political superiors as their final "master" in a democracy.	2	11	5	2	0	2.35
Mean for Beliefs						**2.27**
Behaviour						
5. When providing policy advice, my primary consideration is to promote the public interest.	5	9	4	3	0	2.24
6. When implementing policies, I use my discretion to make them as consistent as possible with the public interest.	7	12	1	1	0	1.81

Statement	Responses					Average Score
	1 Strongly Agree	2 Agree	3 Neutral	4 Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree	
7. I only implement orders that, in my view, are in the public interest.	1	10	7	3	0	2.57
8. I comment publicly or disclose information on policies that I think are against the public interest, even when not expressly authorized by my superior.	0	0	2	9	9	4.35
Mean for Behaviour						**2.74**

With respect to beliefs, our respondents reported moderate support for their role in promoting the public interest (as they see it), as indicated by the overall mean of 2.27. Statement 1 adds the public but without excluding political superiors as the object of answerability. This may have led to greater support than would have been the case had the public been held out as the sole entity to which bureaucrats are answerable. However, the other three statements on promoting the public interest that clearly contrast the public interest with that of political superiors received similar levels of support. We therefore conclude that our respondents show moderate normative reception of the public-interest model of bureaucratic responsibility.

The public interest is also reported to be a moderately strong source of guidance for bureaucrats in their behaviour. Again, although statement 5 is weaker than if it stipulates the public interest as the sole and not merely the primary consideration for bureaucrats in policy advising, support for it is not significantly higher than for the stronger statement 7. The mean for behaviour of 2.74, which is noticeably higher (i.e. more negative) than that for beliefs, suggests that the public interest is more accepted in bureaucrats' beliefs than in their behaviour. However, this difference is solely due to the highly discordant and negative response (average score: 4.35) to the last statement in the table. We expect bureaucrats who serve the public interest against all else to agree with this statement. However, our respondents clearly report that they refrain from public comment and information-disclosure on policies that they believe to be against the public interest. In this regard, our respondents follow very closely the dictates of the neutral model, even though they reportedly promote the public interest in other ways. This finding importantly qualifies their support for the public-interest model.

Apparently, acceptance of the public-interest model by bureaucrats does not extend to publicly questioning the decisions and actions of their political

superiors. Bureaucrats may not regard ruling politicians as necessarily the best judge of the public interest; nor do they seem to regard themselves as solely or ultimately accountable to ruling politicians. They are not indifferent to the public interest and they try to further it as opportunities permit. But more important to them is avoiding open conflict with political superiors – and presumably also prosecution under the strict secrecy laws currently in force. Promoting the public interest in policy advising, exercising their discretion in ways that further the public interest in policy implementation, perhaps even refraining from enthusiastic implementation of policies they believe to be against the public interest – all of which are reported by our respondents – can be done in a manner that does not appear to frontally and publicly challenge the authority of political superiors. But such a perception, and the wrath of political superiors, would inevitably follow if they publicly question or erode public support for the latter's decisions. Our respondents accept the public-interest model, but this acceptance is subject to the limits imposed by the acknowledged right of political superiors to determine policy. Not for them, apparently, the whistle-blowing or even unauthorized leaks that a bureaucratic crusader might resort to in the name of the public interest.

A Coherent Hybrid Model?

Bureaucrats face upwards as well as outwards. They need to develop workable ways or norms for relating to both political superiors and society (including interest groups), from which different demands and expectations may emanate. We did not begin with the assumption that bureaucrats have developed a fully coherent model of their own responsibility for themselves, or that they necessarily need to. After all, no less an observer than Waldo (1968:14) has long suspected that "we like it both ways, anonymity and neutrality or identity and a cause, as suits our purpose of the moment." Whether by "we" he meant academics or bureaucrats is unclear, but his statement must surely apply with greater force to bureaucrats pressed by multiple and shifting political demands and having to reconcile these with their personal and professional values. An earlier empirical study in fact found bureaucrats using different and partially conflicting models in combination. "Rather than abandon moral claims they have acquired at previous stages of their careers," Morgan and Kass (1993: 179-180) report, "our panelists simply add one set of values to the other and do not spend much time constructing a framework to order or to reconcile their potential incompatibilities."

We also find bureaucrats using different models in combination. None of the four models is completely rejected by our respondents. The received model of responsibility among our bureaucrats – if it is justified, as it seems to be, to speak of a single overarching model -- is a composite or hybrid of all the four

models we identified. Historically part of the British colonial heritage, the neutral model continues to enjoy the highest level of reception among bureaucrats and constitutes the dominant component in their hybrid model. Next, and of roughly equal importance, are the pluralist and public-interest models. Least important is the partisan model, which is largely, though not completely, rejected. The incomplete rejection of the partisan model, unsurprising under conditions of one-party dominance, suggests its occasional use – or perhaps more accurately, occasional compliance with it -- by bureaucrats in their relations with political superiors. That our bureaucratic respondents combine the various models in their received notion of bureaucratic responsibility clearly indicates that they do not see their political responsibility purely in traditional upward or formal-hierarchical terms. Upward responsibility, in accordance with the neutral model, remains primary but our evidence shows clear signs of acceptance by bureaucrats of the weak pluralist and public-interest models of outward responsibility as well.

The combined use of various models raises another question: To what extent, and how, has conflict among these models been reconciled in the received hybrid model? When models that are at least partially incompatible with one another are used together, we expect the conflict to be "managed" somehow, not necessarily to eliminate it altogether but to keep it within tolerable bounds -- for at least two reasons. First, there is a limit to the amount of conflict that bureaucrats, as human beings, can tolerate or live with. Second, there is also a limit to the level of bureaucratic inconsistency that formal political superiors can put up with.

One method of managing conflict is the simple psychological device of compartmentalizing the sequential use of logically conflicting models on different occasions. Thus, bureaucrats may veer towards the partisan model on an issue that political superiors feel strongly about, or at a particularly pressing time faced by political superiors, but revert to the neutral model in "normal" administration. Such pragmatism can be rationalized as necessary adaptation to their complex and threatening political environment. The general compliance reported by council bureaucrats with the frequent particularistic "interferences" by councillors, to cite an obvious example from our questionnaire, can be seen in this light. (This resort to expediency can and often is criticized as poor implementation of existing laws. However, bureaucrats may regard such behaviour as a necessary price for reducing conflict with political superiors -- who, for understandable if not always proper reasons, often choose to prefer the trees to the forest and intercede on behalf of individual constituents and other particularistic interests, including their own. The unmistakable implication is that it is not they, i.e. bureaucrats, who should be blamed for the resulting weaknesses in implementation.)

Our findings strongly suggest that bureaucrats have resorted to yet another, no less simple method -- doing away or dropping those conflicting requirements of the received models that cause them the most problems in actual practice. Or at least, it is *as if* they have done so, for we cannot be sure whether this is done consciously or indeed would be described as such by bureaucrats themselves. We would not describe their adaptation of the various models as an expedient. Unlike their reported accommodation of the particularistic requests or political interferences by councillors, the resulting ideas carry normative force with bureaucrats and represent their beliefs about how they should perform their role in their political setting; in short, these ideas constitute their received political responsibility.

The adaptation of the models would at least explain why the reception of each model is not complete. In each case, the requirement or part of a model that is rejected appears to be the one that would be most inconsistent with the combined use of these models. Even the dominant neutral model has not been spared. Thus bureaucrats normatively accept the neutral model in all its important aspects except sole accountability to political superiors, a requirement that the neutral model shares with the partisan model. Normatively, acceptance of exclusive accountability to political superiors would leave little room for serving the transcendent public interest. This "trimming" of the neutral model helps significantly in reducing dissonance for bureaucrats.

Likewise, the pluralist model is received only to an extent or in a version that avoids irreconcilable conflict with the neutral and public-interest models. To reiterate our main finding, bureaucrats accept participation in decision-making but not determination of decisions by interest groups. Regarded simply or weakly as a procedural requirement to consult interest groups and consider their views rather than to defer to them in decision-making, the pluralist model is readily embraced not only in theory by writers stressing the upward responsibility of the neutral model (Burke, 1986: ch. 11) but also in practice by most democratic countries where the neutral model is the officially approved model (Richardson, 1982). Supporters of the public-interest model should also have no reservations against using the pluralist method of consulting affected interest groups in the search for the more encompassing public interest.

Finally, bureaucrats also trim the public-interest model to exclude public comment and disclosure in order to avoid direct or head-on conflict with ruling politicians. Professing accountability to the public and not only to councillors has obvious potential to cause difficulty, but the most conflict-provoking implication of primary accountability to the public, namely adverse public comment and disclosure with respect to council decisions, has been excised. Bureaucratic actions such as exposing or criticizing publicly, leaking

information, or blowing the whistle, on actions that they regard as offensive to the public interest would be seen by councillors as blatant challenges to their political authority that they cannot afford to ignore. In contrast, bureaucratic promotion the public interest in policy advising can be presented or camouflaged as the giving of honest and objective advice. Indeed, advice on the public interest (though not advocacy of it) is easily subsumed under, if not explicitly required by, the neutral model. Likewise, using discretion to promote the public interest during implementation need not overtly challenge the authority of political superiors. It need not even entail a denial of the right of political superiors to intervene and set a different course if they are not happy with existing bureaucratic performance. Admittedly a full reconciliation of the public-interest model with bureaucratic subordination to political authority is no easy task. Potential sources of conflict still abound, for example in the reluctance of bureaucrats to carry out policies and political directives that they regard as inimical to the public interest. However, what is important for our purpose is that our bureaucratic respondents do try to avoid overt conflict with their political superiors and to keep differences within tolerable bounds.

We are thus more impressed with the level of consistency than with the remaining conflict within the hybrid model of political responsibility that our bureaucrats have apparently developed for themselves. It is apparent that a (perhaps the) central concern shaping the development of the hybrid model is the need or desire on the part of our respondents to avoid open conflict with their political superiors. Democratic ideology and their subordination to politicians in office weigh heavily on council bureaucrats. That councillors are not directly elected makes them no less (conceivably even more) eager to assert and to establish the reality of their control over bureaucrats. If maintaining their authority and control is the primary concern of councillors, coping best describes the central concern of council bureaucrats in their troublesome relationship. Our findings indicate that bureaucrats have not only tried to cope but have done so quite satisfactorily in terms of maintaining a workable relationship with their political superiors.

CAVEATS AND LESSONS

In this paper, we have reported our findings from a questionnaire. Two kinds of limitation are immediately worth noting. First, the data thus consist of self-reports by bureaucrats (on both their beliefs and behaviour) and do not represent actual observation of the behaviour of the bureaucrats concerned. It would not be inaccurate to say that what we have obtained and presented are only the beliefs of bureaucrats – beliefs about their norms as well as behaviour. And it is not surprising that these two kinds of beliefs are highly consistent, as after-the-

fact interpretations of behaviour tend to be highly processed and rationalized to accord with current normative views (Nisbet and Wilson, 1977; Ericsson and Simon, 1980). Moreover, this set of beliefs, which we call received responsibility, inevitably falls short, to some extent, of reflecting or determining actual behaviour. However, it can be expected to have a strong and persistent influence on behaviour and is thus worth identifying.

Second, using questionnaire data to ascertain received responsibility has its hazards. It is clearly conceivable that the natural desire to provide what they perceive to be socially approved answers may have affected the responses of our respondents. Thus our respondents may have indicated a higher degree of rejection of the (nowadays generally disapproved) partisan model than is actually the case. In fact, there is some evidence suggesting this from our questionnaire itself. While bureaucrats report strong rejection of the partisan model in their behaviour, they also indicated general compliance with the particularistic requests of political superiors in another part of the questionnaire. The same factor may have also affected bureaucrats' responses to the public-interest model. Besides our failure to state the pursuit of the public interest in more exclusive terms, perceived social approval may have caused some inflation of the reported support for the public-interest model. However, it is unlikely that the level of reported support for the public-interest model is entirely an artifact of our instrument of data collection.

A third and different limitation concerns the extent to which our findings can be generalized to other Malaysian (not to mention non-Malaysian) bureaucrats. Our findings from the study of a single local government can only be suggestive and are highly so, raising for us the question whether other Malaysian bureaucrats have coped in the same manner or fashioned the same received model as bureaucrats in the Penang Island Municipal Council. If further reminder of this is needed, it is provided by two of our respondents. Our questionnaire ends with some space for "any other comments?" Only two bureaucrats responded. And both made negative remarks on the party-appointment (and not election) of councillors and on the calibre of some of those appointed. One explicitly compared councillors with members of parliament and state assemblies, whom, he noted, are elected and thus "truly" represent the public and are "at least accountable" to them. This at least raises the question whether council bureaucrats would have supported the public-interest model if councillors were not appointed but elected – and, by extension, whether the public-interest model is adopted by bureaucrats working under elected representatives at the state and federal levels. In fact, the anonymous referee for this paper correctly points out that the Penang case, where no single political party has a majority of councilors, may not even reflect the situation in other states where most local governments are dominated by councilors from a

single political party (in most cases from the United Malays national Organization), a condition that may incline bureaucrats more towards the partisan model.

Despite (and even in some ways because of) the above limitations, we feel that our case study may offer some general lessons on the received responsibility of bureaucrats.

Research on the received responsibility of bureaucrats has not progressed very far and the literature, such as it is, shows that no single extant theoretical model is likely to comprehend perfectly the actual practice of their responsibility by bureaucrats (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman, 1981; Morgan and Kass, 1993). Our findings lend support to earlier findings of the hybrid or composite nature of received bureaucratic responsibility. If the embarrassing wealth of theoretical models does not suffice to deny total obeisance to any single model, then the multiplicity of demands and norms impinging on the bureaucratic role in government is almost certain to put paid to any such simplistic expectation. We suspect that, in varying degrees, such a situation is likely to hold regardless of differences in other conditions and even in political systems, like parliamentary ones, with a clearly enunciated and officially sanctioned model of bureaucratic responsibility.

Not only is the exact balance among models received by bureaucrats likely to vary, as the research by Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman (1981) shows, but the combined use of incompatible models also raises the issue of how bureaucrats handle conflict among the models. Some writers have suggested or taken positions that imply how this should be done (Miles, 1965; Burke, 1986), but the actual handling of conflict by bureaucrats remains an empirical question. To investigate this, it appears essential, as we have tried, to identify the various requirements or components of each of the models. Only by decomposing each of the models into its specific requirements were we able to discover that a model is neither rejected nor accepted *in toto* and to examine the extent to which specific requirements of each model are rejected or received by bureaucrats.

Last but not least, if the received responsibility of bureaucrats is inevitably some contingent balance among competing models and their requirements, then this points to a promising line of further research. It would seem useful to discover through comparative research the main factors that affect the received responsibility of bureaucrats and the relative importance of these factors. The balance of competing norms evolved by bureaucrats being variable and affected by these factors, knowledge of these factors and their relative efficacy would seem essential for informing action for moving the *de facto* balance from a less

to a more satisfactory state. In discussing our empirical findings and their applicability to local government bureaucrats in other states and to bureaucrats at other levels of government, we have referred mainly to political factors, specifically the degree of party dominance, but there are obviously other potentially relevant factors, including the professional socialization of bureaucrats and their terms of employment, that need to be identified and evaluated.

We offer the following proposition in conclusion: in moving from prescribed to received responsibility, the question is not whether but how a balance among normative models will be struck, the terms of the balance and the factors that influence it.

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