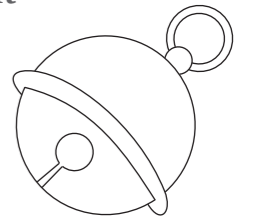


# Speaking truth to power

**Martin Lodge** considers how questions of expertise and advice are central to understandings of contemporary executive government



Questions about 'speaking truth to power' and what qualifies as expertise are fundamental to the practice and study of executive government, e.g. the day-to-day management of the state. What is seen as competent and what particular forms of expertise are regarded as legitimate touches on fundamental questions about the confidence and trust of the wider political system, parliament and the wider public, in executive government. After all, this is the time when the wider [British] public is supposed to have had 'enough of experts'.<sup>1</sup>

Advice and expertise-related issues link to long-standing debates about what kind of skills and competencies are expected from public bureaucracies and how such expertise should be recruited, organized and rewarded. Questions about expertise and skills also touch on issues of loyalty. How should different forms of expertise be integrated and coordinated? What qualifies as a 'good' piece of policy-making in formal and informal ranking and evaluation systems? What mechanisms are taken to provide for 'balanced' and/or 'neutral' advice in executive government? What oversight or advisory bodies exist, if any, to ensure the impartial recruitment of expertise and the provision of 'speaking truth to power'?

Answers to these questions have changed over time. They relate to debates about loyalty and career structures, such as whether expertise and advice are provided as part of a 'personal' or 'partisan' loyal relationship between advice-giver and receiver, or whether expertise and advice are better organized on the basis of 'serial monogamy', i.e., the reliance on a permanent civil service that loyally serves the government of the day. Different kinds of advice-giving imply different kinds of loyalty understanding. Speaking 'truth to power' needs therefore to be understood in its diverse forms and potential consequences, whether it relates to questions about advising on ethics, political manoeuvring, or questions of scientific or legal expertise.

## What is good, if not 'best in world' expertise and advice?

Debates about what constitutes appropriate competences and skills in executive government have varied over time, whether it is in terms of educational attainment levels, disciplinary requirements (lawyers vs economists) or types of skills (policy formulation vs. 'delivery'). Different views also exist as to whether government should have 'best in world' expertise in-house, or rely on the procurement of such advice, and/or see its role as a 'boundary-spanner', knowing where to find advice and expertise and bringing these together (Hood and Lodge

2006). For Max Weber, for example, civil service competence related both to subject and 'office' expertise (*Fachwissen* and *Dienstwissen*).

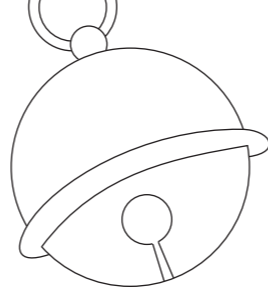
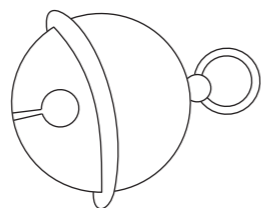
We also find differences in the ways in which official human resource management systems define 'competence', ranging from skills-based views to purely behavioural understandings (displaying some usually ill-defined 'excelling behaviours', for example). Examining the question of who defines what is competent and what is regarded as 'best in world' offers important insights into the ways in which the relationship between politics and administration is being defined. For example, it is suggested that in certain political systems the frame of reference for 'good advice' has changed, from one that is purely viewed in terms of 'good professional' advice to one that is 'good professional and politically useful' advice. Such changes in standards of reference to a more partisan and adversarial understanding of advice-giving, which some may call 'politicization', can have significant consequences, especially when it comes to legal-constitutional disputes about the extent of executive power.

## How can 'best in world' expertise be recruited, organized and rewarded?

Different areas of government activity call for different types of expertise. In the UK, there have been attempts to formalize professional 'expectations' and demands on expertise through the creation of different 'professions', for example, the 'policy profession' (in contrast to, for example, the economic or 'counter fraud profession'). How such professional knowledge around policy advice can be created and developed is a challenging question. There are hardly any codified 'standards' when it comes to matters of policy formulation and the organization of public bureaucracy, unlike, for example, the legal or economic professions which have established knowledge bases, task areas and jurisdictions. Creating professional identities amongst experts providing advice also comes with certain risks. For example, if dominant professional understandings of what constitutes 'good expertise' crowd out potential sources of disagreement, this gives rise to concerns regarding 'conceptual capture', with risks arising from unquestioned shared worldviews between policy professionals, including regulators, and industries.

In certain areas of government, expertise might be highly specialized and in-house recruitment might compete with private sector organizations. One example was the call for 'trade poli-





cy specialists' in the context of the UK government's scramble for trade-deals post-Brexit. Another would be the search for 'big data'-related expertise in different public sector organizations. Such calls for the recruitment of lacking competency challenges standard bureaucratic career patterns. What kinds of career patterns exist and/or should be encouraged in these areas? Pay differentials between private and public organizations create a particular dynamic in terms of creating demands for 'creative' bureaucratic arrangements, such as revolving-door career patterns or a greater need to rely on so-called contractors which, in turn, increases the importance of expertise and advice on managing 'conflict of interest' and the creation of divesture rules. In other words, bringing in expertise is not just about ensuring the presence of specialist expertise on particular issues, it is also about safeguarding sufficient expertise to manage and organize recruitment and career patterns within executive government.

#### How to balance expertise and advice?

Debates about politicization often start with the basic dichotomy between 'partisan loyalty' and 'neutral competence'. Whether such neutral competence does exist is questionable. However, what steps can be taken that different aspects of a debate (amongst experts and between laypersons and experts) will be heard when there is a governmental preference for a specific kind of expertise that may come with a specific type of (desired) advice? Questions of ensuring an appropriate balance also point to issues regarding appropriate venues for advice-giving and expertise-sharing, given the often contested understandings as to what qualifies as 'legitimate' form of expertise.

There might be certain policy issues where expertise is highly concentrated and issue-specific. In such cases, it might be difficult to envisage how such expertise can be 'balanced'. For example, during a banking crisis, it is quite apparent that knowledge of banking is required, but a highly time-sensitive recruitment often collides with demands for vetting and avoiding conflict of interest situations. How such 'emergencies' are being navigated in times of crisis remains an under-explored research area.

Questions about biases in expertise have long-standing currency in debates about risk and science, for example whether experts wish to appear as, in the terms of Roger Pielke (2003),

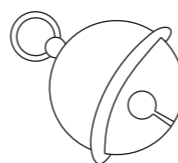
'neutral scientists', 'science arbiters', 'honest brokers' or 'issue advocates'. However, the fulfilment of these roles relies on mutually shared understandings of appropriate forms of 'truth-telling'. The political appetite regarding the appropriate parameters of advice-giving and advice-accepting has proven to be highly variable across individuals and time. As in all relationships, such mutual understandings about roles and conventions are therefore also open to accusations of 'cheating' by the other side, for example, when advice proves not to be politically helpful.

#### How can advice-giving and expertise in government be monitored?

Finally, the reliance on particular bureaucratic arrangements (such as the recruitment of outside contractors and other short-term 'consultants' as well as a revolving-door career patterns) requires the development of specific expertise and advice capacity to deal with questions of procedural appropriateness, including ethics. The rise of ethics watchdogs in government can therefore be seen as a response to greater heterogeneity of career patterns within executive government. These bodies have, however, an unenviable set of tasks: How can recruitment of expertise be monitored to ensure appropriateness and balance, and what kind of powers should such monitoring bodies have? As the example of the US shows, the authority of the Office of Government Ethics is highly contingent on the willingness of politicians in power to respect that office in the first place.

The criticism that the public 'had enough of experts' points to a central challenge for the organization of executive government. There are different ways of 'telling truth to power' – how expertise is being defined and how this expertise is positioned vis-à-vis those in political power - and different political environments generate demand for different types of expertise.

For regulation, this poses two questions. One is what kind of expertise and competencies are required for regulators to understand and act upon changes inside (and outside) their jurisdictions. The other is how the recruitment of expertise and the operation of advice giving can be overseen – a context in which political authority expresses dissatisfaction with the traditional sources of advice is a distinctly uncomfortable place for those regulating the context of advice-giving.



This text reflects on the discussions at the **carr** workshop on 'Advice and Expertise in Executive Government'.

- 1 As British cabinet minister Michael Gove put it during the 2016 Brexit referendum ('Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove', *Financial Times*, 3 June 2016).

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