

# Reinventing trust: the political-administrative interface in Caribbean small states

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## Introduction

This paper discusses the issue of trust between the political and administrative directorates in small states of the Commonwealth Caribbean. Trust has been a recurring theme of the Governance and Institutional Development Divisions' (GIDD) high level retreats for Cabinet ministers of transitional governments in Grenada, St Lucia, St Vincent and Dominica, as well as for permanent secretaries in the same states over the last six years. The paper also raises serious questions about the dominant analytical paradigm based on legal, institutional and sociological approaches to trust.

## The political-administrative interface

The political-administrative interface is the term used to describe the functional relationship between the politicians (ministers) and administrators (permanent secretaries), and is considered one of the most important aspects of the machinery of government (MOG). Max Weber (1980) in his theory of bureaucracy played a pioneering role in outlining the significance and conceptual foundations of the political-administrative interface<sup>1</sup>. He argued that there should be clear terms of roles and responsibilities for the politicians and administrators for an effective relationship. This view was based on Weber's conviction that bureaucrats (administrators) were technical people who were supposed to be politically neutral, give non-partisan advice to the politicians and execute the decisions of the politician to the best professional standard. Furthermore, Weber insisted that in terms of hierarchy, the administrator is subordinate to the politician.

While mainstream analysis of the political-administrative interface is informed by the prognoses of the Weberian model of public administration, the importance of trust is still deemed fundamental to an effective relationship between the politician and administrator. A careful scrutiny of the experiences in many countries, including the United Kingdom and Canada where variants of the Weberian model is practised, questions about trust and/or expectations between the politician and senior public servants do still arise<sup>2</sup>. These questions are even more

pronounced in small island developing countries in the Caribbean, given their 'smallness', contiguous interpersonal relations and serious developmental challenges.

First and foremost, in the Weberian model, the argument of subordination of the administrator to the politician is fraught with conflicts if the relationship is not managed appropriately. In addition, the Weberian model suggests that the political-administrative interface is based on mutual dependability, because the administrators are considered subordinate but at the same time, so are the advisers to the politician (minister), due to their institutional knowledge, technical experience and years of on-the-job experience. On the other hand, politicians are generally not exposed to the detail of administrative bureaucracy and mostly rely on these administrators for advice and guidance. So their functions are intrinsically linked and therefore a functional relationship is imperative. Research has shown that best results are achieved when these two parties in the relationship work together co-operatively<sup>3</sup>.

## Trust for effective political-administrative relations

There is no doubt that the mainstream literature's emphasis on roles and hierarchical arrangement cannot be overemphasised. However, it is equally important to scrutinise how political-administrative interactions shape policy outcomes. Despite the critical importance of the question of trust, it has not attracted much attention in the mainstream literature on political-administrative relations.

The issue of the political-administrative interface has long been associated with the inception of democratic governments<sup>4</sup>. Yet this problem has been approached most of the time from the legal (constitution), institutional (policy frameworks) and roles and responsibilities perspectives. The literature in this field is abundant with technical and sociological solutions on how to balance this relationship, particularly in transitional governments. Nonetheless, this paper applies philosophical tools that unearth the nuanced underpinnings of the political-administrative relations that are particularly difficult to track solely on legal, institutional and sociological approaches.

A positive political and administrative interface is required for effective governance, growth and development of the state. How these two actors work together is therefore of critical importance. Peters likens the relationship to a ‘transmission belt’ within the public sector<sup>5</sup>. According to him, the ‘upward transmission is for advice, information and loyalty to the mission rather than the person, but it depends on the permanence, experience and knowledge of the permanent secretary’. The ‘downward transmission deals with legitimacy of government, policy direction and accountability’. Peters’ illustration emphasises the mutual dependence of the actors – the politician and the permanent secretary – which require some form of trust for sustainability of the relationship. Agere echoes this when he observed that without the trust of the minister, the permanent secretary would find it very difficult to manage the ministry effectively and vice versa<sup>6</sup>, making trust central to the functional relationship between the minister and the permanent secretary.

### Issues of trust in Caribbean small states

Trust is an attitude and because of the low power-distance ratio between those who govern and the governed, prior knowledge of each party in the relationship (minister and the permanent secretary) with regards to trustworthiness or untrustworthiness is under scrutiny and constantly being updated. Therefore, the attitude of the minister and the permanent secretary towards each other would reflect the knowledge and beliefs of each other. So it is very challenging for the new minister to assume office with an attitude of trust rather than one of scepticism, leading both the minister and permanent secretary to adopt a default position of untrustworthiness<sup>7</sup>.

Another issue linked to the smallness of states and the politicisation of the civil service is the existence of familial relationships, which may be seen as an advantage or a disadvantage. On the one hand, it may be an added advantage since trust is ‘achieved in a familiar world’<sup>8</sup>, and efficiency on the job would be a ‘given’ deserving of trust. While on the other hand, the familiar world in small states usually allows one to have unrealistic expectations in addition to the sometimes questionable motives of some of these familial relations. Hence the level of risk associated with familial relations may be quite high and would require constant monitoring or some form of constraint so as to protect the fragility of the relationship<sup>9</sup>.

The issue of trust between the political and administrative interface has led some small states like Belize to institute contracts of employment for permanent secretaries<sup>10</sup>. However, even though the contract system of employment may be working, philosophers have contended that contracts are instruments used to compel trustworthiness by force because of self-interest. They further argue that such contracts are only partially responsible for the motivation of trustworthiness and cannot account for full trustworthiness<sup>11</sup>.

The trust issues become even more complex when ministers are involved in administration, especially the hiring, transfer, promotion and remuneration of staff – a source of major conflict in civil services. Because of the partisan nature of the civil service – weak institutional structures and hardly any measurement of performance – ministers feel that they should be in a position to select staff for their ministry to minimise the presence of ‘malicious compliance’. Malicious compliance is evident in the civil service and refers to a situation where the competent civil servant behaves incompetently by being inflexible and abandoning the use of discretionary powers attached to his/her office in order to obstruct the efficiency of operations of the government machinery. One prime minister recently utilised this concept of ‘malicious compliance’ in reference to the attitude of some civil servants in government. He inferred that their presence at work is not to perform but to obstruct the machinery of government from performing through the use of ‘malicious compliance’<sup>12</sup>. Jones, however, believes that in order to reduce malicious compliance in situations of trust, the type of competence required is one of ‘moral competence’, and goes on to define moral competence as loyalty, kindness and generosity exhibited at appropriate times<sup>13</sup>.

Ministers complain that the permanent secretaries they inherited are incompetent, and one of the reasons for this complaint is because ministers expect the permanent secretaries to be ‘competent in every way’. And where they lack competence, even if unrelated to the job, it is assumed that the permanent secretaries are generally incompetent. This should not be the case, because a person does not have to be competent in every way since trust is placed in the competence of what the person is asked to do<sup>14</sup>.

The contagion of the global financial crises has added to the above challenges, and seen the decline of the major industries, such as tourism and construction, which has led to increased unemployment and increased demands by citizens. So the elected politician now has time constraints in the implementation of his/her political priorities. He/she wants to show that the government of the day is keeping its promises and is responsive to citizens’ needs within the context of a dynamic environment. On the other hand, the permanent secretary is likely to be an experienced administrator who is not time-bound, but wants to ensure that the rules and procedures are met subject to transparency and accountability measures. So time and speed, while very important to the minister, may not be as important for the permanent secretary and this may be perceived in a small state as the permanent secretary being untrustworthy. The presence of appointed political advisers and the frequent perception made by civil servants that the political are not ‘technically qualified’ increases the complexity<sup>15</sup>.

Another characteristic of small island states is that government is the major employer, and growth and development are influenced by the seated prime minister’s

vision. As in other countries, government determines who gets what, where, when and how, and therefore it is important for the permanent secretary to work with the minister to deliver on government's priorities.

While the permanent secretary does not have to agree with the policies of the minister, he/she is required to implement these policies in an unbiased way and in the public interest. When this does not happen rapidly, due to other infrastructural challenges, the politically motivated public servants or other stakeholders then place significant pressure on the minister to have the permanent secretary removed from office. The permanent secretary may then be transferred to an obscure position within the public service, in spite of the shortage of professionals. So it is not uncommon to find public servants promoted based on perceived loyalty to the political administration and not necessarily on merit. Hurley argues that where promotion is based on loyalty, it may make the 'minister feel more comfortable, tend to like the permanent secretary more and may gain their reciprocity, which will build trust'<sup>16</sup>. Baier, in supporting the latter's view, argues that support for loyalty rather than merit may be seen as being 'easier to remedy incompetence than ill will'<sup>17</sup>. This is precisely the particular argument made by politicians themselves when they maintain that public servants can always be trained to do the job as long as they have the interest of the government at heart. Hardin would refer to this 'interest at heart' as the 'encapsulated interest' based on trust<sup>18</sup>.

## Views on trust

Trust is often stated in the form of 'A trusts B to do X', which means that one trusts another to perform a certain task within a certain domain. Trust can also be stated in the form of 'A trusts B', which means that A trusts B with everything and the scope is unspecified or unrestricted – but this is not the form of trust that should be expected to exist between the political and administrative interface. Although there is relative agreement by philosophers on the value and nature of trust, in practice trust is used in a variety of ways with different interpretations.

The results of the high level retreats in Grenada, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Dominica showed that there were commonalities in what was believed by ministers and permanent secretaries to be trust, and which were further interpreted as criteria for trust. They are as follows:

- Integrity
- Commitment
- Loyalty
- Equity
- Excellence
- Accountability
- Efficiency.

The above criteria for trust given by ministers and permanent secretaries are not new, as they are included in the relevant literature on trust, but they need to be understood in the context of how institutional structures support and enhance trust relations between the political and administrative interface.

Baier argues that for any form of co-operative activity, including division of labour, trust should be a moral requirement<sup>19</sup>. In the domain of the civil service, the minister (politician) has direct control of the ministry, which means that he/she ought to maintain the integrity of the systems of the machinery of government – a constitutional requirement. In defining the policies, which have to be developed and implemented by the permanent secretary, the minister needs to work closely with the permanent secretary who has the knowledge, technical expertise and long tenure within the civil service. This type of 'information asymmetry' can facilitate the permanent secretary hiding or withholding important information from the minister, thereby making it harder for the minister to achieve the desired goals<sup>20</sup>. While there may be hidden action or a hidden agenda of the permanent secretary, there is also the potential for the permanent secretary to apply 'malicious compliance' – rigidity and over-zealousness in the application of rules and procedures, which will also not allow the objectives of the minister to be achieved<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, for functional co-operation between the minister and permanent secretary, trust means that the minister has to adopt an attitude of tolerating the permanent secretary to whom he/she is vulnerable since it may be a costly relationship if not managed properly<sup>22</sup>.

Both minister and permanent secretary have roles and responsibilities as provided within the constitution of the various states, and so have a duty to fulfill them. Fulfilling roles and responsibilities is also a matter of integrity, which means standing by one's fundamental ethical commitments to parties in the relationship, even though for the politician, politics with integrity could be a challenge<sup>23</sup>.

Commitment also ensures that there is fairness of treatment of all civil servants and that the behaviour of both the minister and permanent secretary reflect impartiality, which is critical to the quality of government<sup>24</sup>. Commitment would also require that communication exists between the minister and permanent secretary as it enhances trustworthiness and demonstrates overall interest. Due to the nature of co-operation needed between the minister and the permanent secretary, trust becomes a moral (impartial) requirement for the relationship.

Everyone makes a decision to trust in a particular domain on a daily basis, and the minister is expected to be open and take the default position of neutrality as a newcomer to the organisation. Openness will allow the minister to receive more information through listening, and the minister can adjust his perception of the trustworthiness of the permanent secretary<sup>25</sup>. In so doing, the minister will be

extending good will, and at the same time demonstrating confidence in the competence of the permanent secretary, which are all requirements for trust<sup>26</sup>. Trust is reciprocal, and the minister's show of goodwill towards the permanent secretary in the initial meeting will also demonstrate the integrity and commitment that may encourage the permanent secretary to consider reciprocating in a like manner.

Trust based on the goodwill of the permanent secretary is vital to the effective functioning of the civil service in small states where there is a combination of relationships hinged on family ties. On the other hand, misplaced trust can expose the minister to severe betrayals and even exploitation, and so the relationship needs to be balanced in the personal and public interest. As new people enter an organisation they are seen as outsiders, and Hardin observes that many of them might start out by being optimistic towards people they meet in the organisation but would not trust important matters without a substantial prior history of trustworthiness. And that if one is new to an organisation, one may have other communities or networks to turn to, thereby signaling that he/she is untrustworthy. Hardin further believes that the initial instability experienced on joining an organisation occurs when there are no 'defined prior expected probabilities', but on completion of the transition to formal regulation, trust can be achieved<sup>27</sup>. The permanent secretary is functionally the trusted junior partner in the relationship, and the minister, as the senior partner, must communicate clearly the vision of the ministry and what is needed to accomplish that vision. These discussions need to take place with the permanent secretary at the beginning of the tenure of the minister to avoid misinterpretations and conflicts. This initial discussion not only builds goodwill but also allows the permanent secretary to understand the interests and expectations of the minister and be a part of these interests. If the minister does not have confidence in the competence of the permanent secretary to positively support his/her interest, the minister will not 'empower or take the advice' of the permanent secretary<sup>28</sup>. In other words, the permanent secretary would not be able to act on the minister's behalf or use discretionary power as and when necessary. Therefore, there is a clear need for the permanent secretary to understand the interests of the minister (assuming all are legal) and play a positive role in the acquisition of those interests. However, the level of commitment required by the permanent secretary for positively supporting the minister's interest will depend to some extent on the existing incentive structures within the civil service.

Therefore, an enabling environment of trustworthiness ought to be created by the minister in the first instance, as he/she has the constitutional responsibility of being in charge of the ministry and has the power to punish betrayal. The minister, as part of the Cabinet, is also

responsible for ensuring that there is integrity in the systems and structures of government. The minister can support the integrity of government's institutional structures by upholding standards generally, and in particular standards of performance. Measuring standards of performance is very important for the development and maintenance of a climate of trustworthiness<sup>29</sup>. Measuring standards of performance not only demonstrates excellence, but also transparency, predictability, accountability and efficiency. Where there are no standards and important decisions are made arbitrarily or without transparency, there will be accusations of favouritism, nepotism and even outright bribery.

Permanent secretaries (and in fact the entire civil service) should be governed by codes of ethics, and when the permanent secretary breaches any of the codes or acts in an unprofessional way – for example, by not giving the best professional advice to the minister – the permanent secretary ought to be disciplined appropriately. Failing to take this approach raises questions about the integrity of the institutional structures like the Public Service Commission (PSC), the commitment to accountability and efficiency, and generally questions about the quality of government. This is exactly the point emphasised by Hardin about having institutional support structures for standards of performance that would assist in securing trustworthiness, and in turn support individual trust. When these institutional structures are absent, individuals will use their personal judgement, which may at times not be in the public interest.

## Conclusion

When a new administration takes office, Caribbean and other small states cannot afford the loss of experienced incumbent permanent secretaries on the grounds that they are politically biased and will therefore frustrate the incoming government's priority agenda. The application of philosophical tools to unearth the nuanced underpinnings of the political-administrative relations was used to assist in balancing the trust relationship between the political and administrative interface.

Therefore, in continuance of our work at the Centre of Government in Small States, our focus would not only continue to be on trust between the political and administrative interface but also on strengthening institutional structures, as it has been shown that trust between the political and administrative interface is linked to and supported by strong, efficient and effective institutional structures and processes. These structures include the PSCs, Public Financial Management (PFM) Systems, Performance Management Systems (PMSs), e-government and m-government systems, and the institutionalisation of the code of ethics for public servants.

## Endnotes

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