

**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JOB SECURITY AND FEARLESS
ADVICE? EVIDENCE FROM COUNCILS IN VICTORIA,
AUSTRALIA AND PENANG, MALAYSIA**

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Abstract

This paper explores the theoretical association between job security and the provision of fearless advice in public management. The findings are based on two local government case studies, one set in Victoria, Australia and the other in Penang, Malaysia. They indicate that the assumption of a simple association between permanent employment and fearless advice cannot be sustained.

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INTRODUCTION

Many students of public management assume there is a relationship between job security and the values public servants adopt in their relationship with ruling politicians (Parker 1961; Kernaghan 1976; Williams 1985). They suggest that public servants working under continuing employment will adopt the neutrality ethic. Kernaghan (1976), Williams (1985), and Parker (1961) identify that such employment relations matters as merit based appointments, the promotion opportunities of public servants, and security of tenure are conditional upon, and integral to, public servants adopting the neutrality ethic. Parker (1961) states that politicians:

must get the fullest and frankest advice from their public servants. Here is the main reason for the security and permanence of public employment – to give them time to become expert advisers and freedom to become courageous advisers. (Parker 1961: 302)

Traditionally, public servants in countries following the Westminster style of public management have enjoyed continuing employment but this is no longer the case in most English speaking commonwealth countries. In Australia, senior level public servants at all three levels of government are appointed on fixed term performance contracts. Many commentators have argued that the loss of tenure associated with these appointments is likely to lead to public servants adopting a responsive ethic and becoming 'loyal instruments of ministerial authority' (Considine 1988). These type of employment changes are associated with managerialism (Hughes 1998) and Parker argues that managerialist changes pose a serious threat to the 'official with a conscience' (Parker 1989: 345). Furthermore, Waterford argues that as a result of these reforms public servants would tell ministers what they want to hear, would 'tailor their actions or their style to the whim of the moment' and would not have 'an eye on the public interest' (in Keating 1990: 394).

These arguments establish a 'theoretical' association between job security [or its absence] and the values that public servants adopt in their relationship with ruling politicians. In our view this argument is too simple as the values public servants adopt in this relationship are likely to be influenced by a range of other factors including personality, ethnicity, upbringing and religious background (Ossowska 1971; Williams 1985). This theoretical association could also be the result of historical coincidence rather than occupational necessity (Clark 1959).

From an empirical perspective there is little definable research that verifies the existence or otherwise of this association. It is also not possible to fully empirically examine the association between continuing employment and neutrality in Australia at this juncture because tenured employment has largely been replaced by contract based employment at all senior public service levels. However, many other non-English speaking countries that follow the Westminster style of public management have not changed their senior public servant employment. To take advantage of this, we examine this part of the argument in the context of local government in Penang, Malaysia where public servants are still appointed on a continuing basis. In contrast, we examine the other part of the issue; namely whether or not public servants follow the responsive ethic under contract based employment conditions, at the level of local government in Victoria, Australia.

METHODOLOGY

This part of the paper briefly presents the conceptual framework adopted in this study¹, discusses the variations in organisational setting experienced by the public servants in each location, and outlines the approach to data collection adopted in the two studies.

Conceptual Framework

The focus of this research is on the councillor – council officer role relationship and to explore this relationship we utilise an appropriate dimensional approach consistent with that developed by Pratchett and Wingfield (1996) and Maranto and Skelley (1992). In this study we identify three main dimensions of councillor – council officer role relations. These are the object of the council officer's obedience, the degree of anonymity they adopt in their role and the degree of partisanship they exhibit in the twin functions of policy advice and implementation (see Table 1).

Table 1: Value Dimensions and Patterns in Councillor-Council Officer Role Relations

Dimensions	Patterns	
	Neutral	Responsive
Object of Obedience	Law/councillor	Councillor/Party
Partisanship	Non-Partisan	Partisan
Anonymity	Anonymous	Non-Anonymous

In this framework (Table 1), neutral civil servants owe obedience to the law and to their political superiors, conditional upon the latter acting within the law. They are non-partisan, 'party neutral' but not 'politically neutered' (Uhr 1987: 22) in their dealings with political superiors. Neutrality implies a division of role between civil servants and political superiors, where civil servants participate in the policy process by providing honest and frank advice. In doing so they take into account the goals of political superiors, the policy merits and the public interest. They faithfully implement lawful policies and instructions decided by political superiors, even if they do not agree with them (Spann 1973; Hecló 1975; Thompson 1985). In this relationship civil servants are expected to be anonymous; to not make public comment or divulge information except with proper authorisation from or on behalf of political superiors (Kernaghan 1976; Williams 1985).

Responsive civil servants also obey their political superiors (Table 1). However, they do not confine themselves 'to the letter and spirit of existing law' but are 'committed believers who would go about doing whatever was necessary to achieve [their superiors'] policy goals' (Aberbach and Rockman 1994: 466). Responsive civil servants provide advice and information that supports their superiors' policy objectives. In this pursuit they might suppress adverse information and even 'cook' data to further the interests of their superiors (Rourke 1992: 545). It follows that responsive civil servants eschew anonymity and would not hesitate to make public comment and manage information to increase support for the policies and goals of their superiors.

Variation in Organisational Setting

The conceptual framework has been applied in local government councils in Victoria, Australia and Penang, Malaysia and it is important at this stage to outline organisational variations that occur

¹ For a comprehensive discussion of this framework see Haidar, A. and Pullin, L. J. (2001) Public Management Morality and the Employment Relationship in the Westminster Style of Cabinet Government: Developing a Conceptual Framework for Empirical Study with Special Reference to Australia, *The Indian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol XLVII, No.4, pp.629-647

between these two settings. In Victoria, local government councillors are democratically elected to form the prescribed council and each council subsequently elects their own mayor from within the elected councillors. The councillors have the direct human resource responsibility for their Chief Executive Officer (CEO), including the role and authority to appoint and dismiss them. Under the Victorian Local Government Act 1989 CEOs are usually appointed on a renewable (at councils discretion) five year, fixed term, performance contract (VLGA 1989). In their turn, the CEO has the role and authority to appoint and dismiss senior council officers and any other council staff. Senior officers are also usually appointed on renewable five year, fixed term, performance based contracts (VLGA 1989).

In contrast, in Malaysia councillors are not democratically elected they are appointed by the relevant State government, which also has the power to terminate their appointment. Interestingly, the president (mayor) is not a councillor but is a public servant similarly appointed by the State government from the public service list. A similar appointment process arises in terms of the council Secretary (CEO) who is also a public servant appointed by the State government. The senior council officers who head the various departments are appointed and dismissed by the council, with oversight approval of the state government. Senior officers are appointed on a continuing basis (tenured and if for some reason they are dismissed from their office, they have the right to appeal against such decisions. The Local Government Act 1976 is quite specific in this regard and states that 'no officer or employee shall be reduced in rank or dismissed without being given a reasonable opportunity of being heard' (LGA 1976: 16.4).

Data Collection

Data collected for the studies involved a combination survey and interview methods where both quantitative and qualitative research were integrated in strategy where the quantitative research facilitated the choice of subject for qualitative investigation (Bryman 1992). This strategy brought together the benefits of structure and process where 'quantitative research is especially efficient at getting to the "structural features" of social life, while qualitative studies are usually stronger in terms of "processual" aspects' (Bryman 1992, 60). It is:

argued that surveys are well-situated to studying stable patterns of interaction, while participant observation best reveals interactions in their most complex forms. The former, featuring aggregate data, can draw a random sample of persons and ascertain their attitudes toward behaviour and action in more than one setting; while participant observation is the main strategy for uncovering patterns of interaction. In combining methods, researchers can reveal aspects of the problem that their strongest method would overlook. (Fielding and Fielding 1986, 69)

In Victoria, we surveyed all 256 senior officers from the 78 local government councils by questionnaire and received 138 responses (52 per cent of the population). We subsequently interviewed 26 of the survey respondents. In contrast to Victoria, the number of councils and senior officers in Penang is much smaller. There are two municipal councils in Penang: *Majlis Perbandaran Pulau Pinang* (MPPP) and *Majlis Perbandaran Seberang Perai* (MPSP), or Penang Island Municipal Council and Seberang Perai Municipal Council. In these two councils we surveyed the 42 top-level council officers by questionnaire and received 32 responses (75% of our target group). We subsequently interviewed 5 of the survey respondents.

The Penang study was completed after the Victorian survey and we were able to modify the questionnaire based on our previous experience and the different cultural environment of Penang. The differences in the two questionnaires are contextual rather than content based and given the facilitative nature of the survey data are comparable from the perspective of establishing the 'structural features' of social life in each of the settings of this study (Bryman 1992, 60).

QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY RESULTS

Each dimension in the conceptual framework was tested by statements using a five point 'Likert' type scale. On this scale 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. Each statement was coded as a variable in SPSS 10.00 for Windows and responses entered as appropriate. The conventional 95 percent confidence level was adopted as an acceptable level for all statistical tests (Tabachnick and Fidell 1996).

The data analysis involved the calculation of mean values and standard deviations for the statements relating to each dimension. This surface level of analysis provided an important initial understanding of the data. It also indicated the extent to which the respondents favoured each of the dimensional statements and the spread of their responses. The mean value for each dimensional statement was then tested for significant difference.

To test the relative strength or weakness of response to a statement requires an appropriate value or benchmark against which the responses can be tested. In this case the test was for significant difference in a dimensional statement mean response against the benchmark value. Given that the mid-point value of three on the Likert type scale represents uncommitted or unsure respondents, it was considered to be an appropriate benchmark on which significant difference could be determined. The significant existence or otherwise of the dimensional statement being tested can be determined by adopting this value as the hypothesised mean² (Coakes and Steed 2001). Any result significantly different from the uncommitted or unsure value (the hypothesised mean) can be assumed to be either positive or negative to the presence being tested.

The appropriate statistical test to determine differences in the mean of a population is the *t* test (Howell 1985). A one-sample *t* test is used in this analysis to determine the difference between the mean value response to a statement and the hypothesised mean. A significant mean response greater than three indicates agreement with the statement being tested and a significant mean score less than three indicates disagreement with the statement being tested. In the event that a significant positive or negative difference from the mid-point value cannot be established, it has been taken that the population is statistically uncommitted or unsure in terms of the issue being tested.

Local Government Survey, Victoria

Table 2 indicates the mean value and *t* test result for the Victorian statements in the neutrality value pattern. It can be seen from the table that the Victorian council officers (VCOs) significantly supported most of the neutral statements tested. The respondents preferred to implement procedurally correct policies ($M = 3.50$; $t(137) = 5.179$, $p < .05$, two-tailed), tried to not let their personal views influence their policy formulation advice ($M = 3.78$; $t(137) = 9.385$, $p < .05$, two-tailed) and also tried to ensure the public interest is at least considered in policy formulation ($M = 4.38$; $t(137) = 22.562$, $p < .05$, two-tailed). There was also significant disagreement with the view that they should make public comment on procedurally incorrect policies ($M = 2.12$; $t(137) = -11.378$, $p < .05$, two-tailed) or disclose information on them ($M = 2.01$; $t(137) = -12.583$, $p < .05$, two-tailed).

² The term 'hypothesised mean' is the test value in a one-sample *t* test used to determine whether or not the population mean in the sample is significantly different (Coakes and Steed 2001).

Table 2: Statements Testing the Neutrality Pattern – Victoria

Dimension	Statement	Mean (M)	One-Sample t test (DF = 137)
Obedience	I would only implement procedurally correct policies.	3.50	5.179*
Partisanship	I try to ensure that my personal views do not influence my policy formulation advice.	3.78	9.385*
Partisanship	In providing policy formulation advice I try to ensure that the public interest is at least <u>considered</u> .	4.38	22.562*
Anonymity	I would only make a public comment on a procedurally <u>incorrect</u> policy decision.	2.12	-11.378*
Anonymity	I would only disclose information on procedurally <u>incorrect</u> policy decisions.	2.01	-12.583*

Note: * = significant at $P < .05$

Table 3 indicates the mean value and t test result for each statement in the responsive type value pattern. It can be seen from the data in this table that support for items in the responsive pattern are generally not significant.

Table 3: Statements Testing the Responsive Pattern – Victoria

Dimension	Statement	Mean (M)	One-Sample t test (DF = 137)
Obedience	I would implement all policies without question.	2.09	-10.971*
Partisanship	When providing policy formulation advice I would <u>not</u> try to ensure that the public interest is <u>considered</u> .	1.48	-25.671*
Partisanship	My superior's political views are of no concern when I am providing policy formulation advice.	3.80	8.349*
Anonymity	I would never make a public comment on a policy decision.	2.84	-1.463
Anonymity	I would never disclose information on policy decisions.	2.92	-.729

Note: * = significant at $P < .05$

VCOs disagreed with the view that they would implement all decisions without question ($M = 2.09$; $t(137) = -10.971$, $p < .05$, two-tailed) and that they would not try to ensure the public interest is considered in policy formulation ($M = 1.48$; $t(137) = -25.671$, $p < .05$, two-tailed). It can be seen (Tables 2 and 3) that there is support for obedience to the law ($M = 3.50$; $t(137) = 5.179$, $p < .05$, two-tailed) but the respondents do not support blind obedience to the demands of the elected official ($M = 2.09$; $t(137) = -10.971$, $p < .05$, two-tailed). They also stated that they would not take into account their superior's political views when providing policy advice ($M = 3.80$; $t(137) = 8.349$, $p < .05$, two-tailed). However, the respondents were undecided on whether they would never disclose information on policy decisions ($M = 2.92$; $t(137) = -.729$, $p > .05$, two-tailed) or never make public comment on these decisions ($M = 2.84$; $t(137) = -1.463$, $p > .05$, two-tailed).

Penang Survey

Table 4 indicates the mean value and *t* test result for each variable in the neutrality value-pattern of Penang council officers (PCOs). It can be seen from the table that there is considerable support for neutral values in all of the dimension statements. The findings in the neutrality dimension are all statistically significant at the $p = <.05$ level. They indicate that PCOs will impartially implement council policy in accordance with rules and regulations ($M = 4.22$; $t(31) = 8.700$, $p < 0.05$, two-tailed, and carry out the lawful orders of councillors ($M = 3.84$; $t(31) = 4.834$, $p < 0.05$), two-tailed. Respondents also indicate support for the neutral value of non-partisanship. When advising councillors they will provide views and information on all relevant matters even if they do not coincide with those of the councillors ($M = 4.16$; $t(31) = 8.099$, $p < 0.05$), two-tailed. This extends to considering the preferences of their superiors and the public interest ($M = 3.94$; $t(31) = 7.411$, $p < 0.05$), two-tailed. The final dimension in the neutral value-pattern is anonymity, the willingness or otherwise of a civil servant to go public or disclose information without proper authorisation. The respondents again adopted neutral values by indicating that they would not make public comment or disclose information without proper authorisation ($M = 4.75$; $t(31) = 22.502$, $p < 0.05$), two-tailed.

Table 4: Neutrality Dimension Responses – Penang

Dimension Tested	Variables	Mean (M)	One Sample <i>t</i> test DF = 31
Obedience	I implement policies impartially and in accordance with rules and regulations	4.22	8.700*
Obedience	I carry out only the lawful orders of the councillors	3.84	4.834*
Partisanship	When advising, I provide views and information on all relevant matters, even if they do not coincide with those of the councillors	4.16	8.099*
Partisanship	In providing policy formulation advice, I consider both the preferences of my superior and the public interest	3.94	7.411*
Anonymity	I never make public comment or disclose information without proper authorisation	4.75	22.502*

Note: * = significant at $P < .05$

Table 5 indicates the mean value and *t*-test result for each dimension in the responsive value pattern of PCOs. The data shows little support for responsive values with respondents disagreeing with all five statements. It was clear that the respondents were uncomfortable with the notion of blind obedience and would not implement all of their superiors orders, particularly illegal ones ($M = 2.00$). Statistical analysis revealed this finding was significant; $t(31) = -5.568$, $p < .05$, two-tailed. However, the responses were not so definite when it came to promoting councillor interests when implementing policies ($M = 2.63$). Statistical analysis revealed this finding was not significantly different from the hypothesised mean, indicating the respondents were undecided or unsure of their commitment on the issue of promoting the interests of the councillors and ruling party when implementing policies; $t(31) = -1.833$, $p > .05$, two-tailed.

The idea of limiting their views and information ($M = 2.22$) and providing policy formulation advice ($M = 1.91$) which supported the councillors policy preferences, was not favoured by these civil servants. Statistical analysis revealed that their disagreement with the idea of limiting their views and information to the councillors policy preference area; $t(31) = -4.020$, $p < .05$, two-tailed, and to

only providing policy formulation advice in their superiors area of preference; $t(31) = -7.962, p < .05$, two-tailed, was significant. In concert with their seeming overall desire for anonymity in public management, these civil servants also indicated they were unlikely to make public comment that promoted support for councillors ($M = 2.31$). Statistical analysis revealed their desire for anonymity was significant; $t(31) = -4.342, p < .05$, two-tailed.

Table 5: Responsive Dimension Responses – Penang

Dimension Tested	Variables	Mean (M)	One Sample T test DF = 31
Obedience	I implement all orders of my superior even if they are not lawful or are against the public interest.	2.00	-5.568*
Obedience	I promote the interests of the councillors and the ruling party while I implement policies.	2.63	-1.833
Partisanship	While advising councillors, I only provide views and information that support their policy preferences.	2.22	-4.020*
Partisanship	When providing policy formulation advice, I consider the preferences of my superior and nothing else.	1.91	-7.962*
Anonymity	I only make public comments and disclose information that promotes public support for the councillors	2.31	-4.342*

Note: * = significant at $P < .05$

DISCUSSION

The questionnaire survey data does not provide a straightforward association between the nature of the employment relationship and senior officer values. In the case of the Victorian survey results, these disconfirm an association between senior officer employment and their values. While the underlying views of some observers (Parker 1961; Kernaghan 1976; Williams 1985) might suggest that VCOs will be responsive under contract employment, the findings significantly indicate that they are neutral. However, the Penang findings are less clear cut and are quite complex. One aspect of the Penang findings confirms the argument of an association between continuing appointment and neutrality. By and large the findings indicate that PCOs tend to be neutral and this is expected of public servants working under continuing appointment conditions. However, PCOs also demonstrate a tendency towards responsive values which makes any simple conclusion a hazardous pastime. This responsive tendency developed greater impetus during the interview phase and suggested that public servant values are influenced by a large number of factors including administrative, political and even societal.

It is interesting to note that the neutral value-pattern is the only one supported by the survey respondents across all dimensions in both the locations. In our view, neutrality has endured in both the locations because PCOs and VCOs believe that the councillors, as political representatives, have the right to decide on and direct the policy framework. One departmental head in Penang supported this view by pointing out that 'even though we do not have council election[s] but the fact that they [councillors] are appointed by the State government they are also supposed to be representing the general public.' There was universal recognition amongst council officers of the constitutionally established role division between officers and politicians. The officers' acknowledgment and unqualified acceptance of this role division was summed up by one PCO who stated that:

The councillors are the policy makers in council so they are the decision makers. Council is something like a mini sort of parliament, whenever council wants to make a decision in terms of policy they are the ones who have the final say. As far as officers [are concerned] ... we are running [the] day to day administrative work, we are doing the day to day programs ... approved by council. But whenever there is a need ... for ...new guidelines, new policies then we are the technical officers, our responsibilities are to study and present [our findings] to the council for a decision.

The legitimacy of council and the council officer's duty to obey was summed up by another PCO who stated that as an officer:

of the council I am supposed to defend the council decision. I am paid to do so. I am not here to express my own personal views ... my duty is to the council not to individual councillors. So if the council has made that decision then I would defend the decision by rationalising and supporting that decision. That is the way I have been trained, that is the way I think ... There are lot of decisions the council rejects, I may disagree with council ... but I have one duty to support and defend the decision of the council, otherwise I should not be here.

Similarly sentiments were echoed by Victorian senior officers. These are summed up by one VCO who stated that:

there's the anointed and the appointed. I didn't get elected, seven people out there did, four beats three, and five beats two. If it's a decision that's not contrary to the Act, even if I might feel that it is not in the public interest, it doesn't matter. I mean I've got to implement that to the best of my ability come what may, or at least not hinder it if it's not something I am directly involved in. I mean, who am I as a humble municipal servant to actually be able to say with confidence, 'well that isn't in the public interest'. That's for the politicians to do and they will be judged on that at the next ballot.

In addition, PCOs also emphasised that council officers bring something additional to the policy process which they themselves do not have. One officer explained this by pointing out that while he had technical expertise 'not every decision is a matter of technical opinion.' Furthermore, other PCOs indicated that council officers are quite incapable of making the contributions that politicians make as 'councillors take political factors into account and [these factors] are more important than technical factors'.

Our findings indicate that neutrality has also endured because it serves as a protective shield for council officers against pressure from councillors. PCOs stated that some councillors are quite assertive and at times aggressive in pursuing their own policy and political objectives and aspirations which they expect PCOs to support. When pressure of this nature occurs, the PCOs use neutrality as a screen or barrier to protect themselves from charges of non-compliance and non-supportive behaviour. The neutrality ethic is also a prudent principle from the self-interested perspective of public managers; a manager with a neutrality orientation can hold on to a job longer as they can continue working for many political groups (Caiden 1996).

Many of the VCOs interviewed argued that local government managers have always followed the neutrality ethic. It has become a part of their personality; it is 'just the way I operate.' One said that neutrality is like a permanent mark on local government managers 'I don't think it [fixed term contract employment] would change the essence of my particular management style. I mean I don't think leopards can change their spots that easily.' Another argued that he would not change his advice because of changes in employment conditions as he believed that the neutrality norm is consistent with public service values. If he adopted any other values it would be inconsistent with his personal managerial ethic and as a result employers are unlikely to appoint him.

However, unlike in Victoria, political pressure in Penang has unmistakably affected the practice of neutrality in local government. Both our survey and interview data indicate that PCOs also demonstrate responsive values. Responsive PCOs will implement policies and advise councillors by keeping the latter's preferences and interests in mind. Under pressure, PCOs play safe by adopting a very formal approach to their role. For example, some of those interviewed insist that their views are recorded when their advice is ignored but most simply take the attitude that their job finishes when their advice is tendered. Many are reluctant, even scared, to take a firm stand on policy issues 'because fingers will be pointed' by councillors. One PCO indicated that we do 'not want to exercise our discretion because we feel that the councillors will come after us.' Another was more forthright and stated that:

We have a group of politicians, our councillors, they have an issue to follow, why should you come out and be victimised, be accused? Some of our colleagues have been harassed or intimidated even in [a] full meeting [of the council]. The relationship is no more conducive. The councillors are telling the officers off ... no more fearless advice!

The findings indicate that PCOs practice passive rather than active neutrality due to a combination of pressures. These range from aggressive politicians, to a perceived lack of protection from their senior compatriots, to the professed tenuous nature of their employment relationship, even though they are supposedly in tenured positions. In terms of aggressiveness, there was a strong indication that councillors insisted that officers be flexible and sympathetic towards their constituents when implementing laws and applying them to particular cases. In both the questionnaire and interviews, PCOs reported that councillors frequently intervene and usually get their way during the implementation process. The outcome is an apparent responsiveness on the part of these public servants. This helps to explain why, of all the statements on responsiveness in Table 5, council officer disagreement is weakest with respect to their 'promoting the interests of the councillors and the ruling party while implementing policies'. However, it was made clear during the interviews that their compliance with councillor requests of this kind is involuntary, even coerced. One officer stated that they:

get hammered in the council. Sometimes they [councillors] criticise me on personalities. I am very very upset [by] it. I know the councillors, they try to stir you up ... It is very annoying. They do not ask you in [a] polite manner [but] in a very rough manner because councillors think that they are the employers, they think they are the boss, they think they have the right to engage you, fire you and dismiss you, they come with that type of feeling, every one of these guys have a lot of ego that they are higher and superior and more conversant than the professionals in the organisation.

The officers also felt quite insecure in taking a firm stand on matters of policy interpretation and implementation. They perceived they would not be protected by the Secretary and President of their councils in the event of a serious confrontation with councillors. The Secretary and the President of their councils are public servants and, quite logically, there was a strong feeling that these leadership positions should support their fellow public servants, but this does not happen. The officers argued that the individuals in these leadership positions were more vulnerable to councillor power than they were. If the councillors took a stand that these leaders did not follow, then they were likely to be dismissed or transferred. This lack of solidarity within the ranks of council officers was associated with a 'take care of yourself' culture where officers felt isolated, exposed and susceptible to councillor pressure when policy issues are contentious and confronting.

This is sick. An officer who is looking for some kind of guidance and support, you may not find it there; he is on his own. No group support ... If you want to do things properly, interpret things properly, there is nobody to take care of you, nobody is here to protect you; there is no godfather here.

This perceived lack of desire to take a firm stand on matters of policy interpretation and implementation is also associated with the nature of the employment relationship of the council officers' themselves. As previously identified, Penang councils can dismiss an officer with the approval of state authority after the officer has been heard. However, it is council committees that make these human resource decisions, the councillors have significant representation on them and are in effect the power brokers in any human resource decision. The majority of PCOs viewed the role of councillors in respect of their promotion and continued employment as decisive and important with a significant capability to take disciplinary action against non-conformists. Some of these officers perceived an employment advantage in being responsive to the wishes and preference of councillors.

This situation makes a very interesting comparison with that in Victoria. Statutorily in Penang, control over the ER matters of council officers is divided between the councillors and the state authority. In actuality, it is fused into one because the state authority appoints councillors from their own respective political parties. In this situation the PCOs perceive that decisions made by councillors would be vetted by the state level politicians. In contrast, although statutorily the CEO in Victoria is the sole authority over the ER matters of council officers, in actuality this control is divided between the CEO and the councillors in what we have termed as a concurrent jurisdiction (Haidar and Pullin 1999). In our view, the VCOs' adherence to the neutrality norm, even under fixed term contract employment conditions, is associated with this 'concurrent' control of senior officer employment by the CEOs. Most of the Victorian CEOs suggested that councillors involved themselves in senior officer employment related decisions. They indirectly influenced senior officer employment matters through budgetary measures and by making comment on senior officer performance. Many of the CEOs interviewed felt this to be a legitimate activity on the part of councillors and these types of comments were given serious consideration in making senior officer employment related decisions. This 'involvement' was justified on the basis of maintaining the relationship between the CEO, the councillors and senior officers. Many CEOs believed that if these councillor comments were not given serious consideration, the working relationship between themselves, the councillors and senior officers would be jeopardised. Given this concurrent control situation over senior officer employment conditions in Victoria, it would be very difficult for a senior officer who has earned the confidence of councillors to be dismissed or not reappointed by a CEO.

It has been argued that public managers cannot complain about the requirement to be obedient (Thompson 1985; Jackson 1988). They are morally obliged to obey the lawful commands of their political superiors and accept these duties on their own volition. The moment they find these duties disagreeable they are free to resign (Thompson 1985; Jackson 1988). However, the implicit assumption underlying this argument is a labour market context where there are alternative employment choices for those with the particular skills of public servants, which in contrast to Victoria, is not the case in Malaysia. There are three factors which limit or confine the public manager employment choice in Malaysia and this we argue coerces responsive behaviour from PCOs.

Firstly, Malaysian council officers are employed by and serve a specific local government council with little or no opportunity to transfer or move within the service to other councils. In reality, labour market opportunities for local government officers are extremely limited. In Victoria the situation is radically different and there is a continued availability of jobs elsewhere. Changes to employment based on fixed term contracts means that contracts are turning over and there are opportunities on a regular and cyclical basis to change jobs. As one senior officer stated when pressed about their employment prospects they were quite adamant that 'I'll get another job elsewhere. I don't believe that's a problem.' Another senior officer argued that 'I've got a job to do; I mean if they cut me out because I'm not towing their political bent, therefore, to me they're the people with the problem ... I'm going' elsewhere.

Many VCOs have accepted that because of the widespread introduction of fixed-term employment conditions there would not be permanence in their work any more and as a consequence they may have to move around. Once this change in employment conditions is accepted, one does not

really need to change one's management norm. As one senior officer in charge of human resource management in one of the larger councils argued:

I've been basically prepared to move around and I think a lot of the other senior officers have been prepared to move around. And understand these days, if someone gets rid of you, they don't want you any more, end of contract, bang, you're going. There's nothing you can do about it, it's the way of the world. I think a lot of people have reconciled to that.

Secondly, since local elections were abolished in the mid-1960s (LGA 1976: s.10), the same coalition party, which has been in continuous control of local government for over 30 years, has also been in continuous control at the Penang state government and the federal level. In Penang the long-term political rule by a dominant coalition party means that there are few, if any, public employment opportunities the coalition party cannot influence. Therefore, if you upset one part of the political elite you are likely to limit the chance of public employment elsewhere. As a consequence, with few employment alternatives if things get unpleasant for them, PCOs are highly vulnerable to the displeasure of councillors.

Finally, the neutrality principle, as a Westminster style of public administration solution for securing a competent civil service under competitive party politics, requires for its sustenance some measure of restraint or discipline on the part of political parties in power (Williams 1985). One such restraint is provided by the alternation of parties in power. This alternation of power also restrains PCOs from opportunistically taking sides to further their careers. The continued rule by a dominant party in Penang, with little or no prospects of party alternation, weakens the incentives and restraint for both ruling politicians and PCOs, tempting politicians to demand more responsiveness and PCOs to succumb to such temptation.

CONCLUSION

This study, by exploring a similar issue across the boundaries of two sovereign states, is able to question the view that the values that guide public servants in their relation to ruling politicians is just a matter of secure employment. The Penang study reveals a much more complicated situation where an interrelated network of constitutional and social institutions that nurture, support and promote public service values are taken for granted in a country like Australia. We argue that matters of convention, political traditions and circumstances primarily condition the values guiding political-civil servant relations in parliamentary systems.

One may well ask why PCOs with 'permanent' employment cannot strictly adhere to neutrality values when VCOs working under contract employment are able to. In our view, this is related to PCOs lacking any sort of employment security, even though they formally enjoy it. This study shows that informal mechanisms that have developed around the political party mechanism have circumvented the constitutional check and balance established to provide security to the PCOs. This constitutional check and balance has been further circumvented by the continuous domination of a one party coalition government since the independence of Malaysia.

It would be quite legitimate to argue, based on the findings of this study, that public service values could even be related not only to job security but to the overall security a society provides to its citizens. We would argue that although VCOS work under a contract conditions they know that even if they were to lose their job, as a last resort they would at least have social security provided by the state in the form of unemployment benefit and family welfare support. This type of support does not exist in Malaysia. PCOs know very well that if they lose their jobs they will have no other avenue through which they would be able to support their families.

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