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Reflections from an Ex-Vice President: The political/civil service divide

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FOREWORD

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The relationship between public servants and ministers is critical to sound, 'evidence-based' policy making. Ideally, in a Weberian public service, officials are empowered to speak truth to power, and offer free and frank advice without fear of bullying or other adverse reprisals. Sadly, as we have seen in both the UK and the US recently, this ideal often does not exist. Ministers seem to want advice only if it fits their ideological prejudices, and public servants seem cowed into silence or (reluctant) agreement. This brief is written by an ex- Vice-President from Ecuador and summarises her views on the different perspectives of ministers and officials. It is instructive. Sadly though, not all ministers have degrees from the Harvard School of Government.... !

1. PURPOSE

1.1 Politicians and civil servants think about public policy differently. This seems obvious, but understanding *how* and *why* their views and priorities are different is crucial to improve policy implementation. In this brief, I will use the example of housing reconstruction after Ecuador's 2016 earthquake to highlight these two perspectives.

2. WHY IT MATTERS

2.1 The lack of awareness by politicians of the public servant's perspective, and vice versa, threatens the reach of development goals. There is a fantastic 'Ted talk' by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 'The danger of a single story',¹ which reminds me of this challenge. In her talk, novelist Adichie warns that if we hear only a single story about a person or a country, we risk a critical misunderstanding. The same is true for public policy.

2.2 The simultaneous alignment and distance between ministers' and civil servants' views are fascinating, yet scary. It sometimes feels like there is a divorce between the two sides, in which each

holds one part of the truth. Initially, I thought this happened in countries like Ecuador, with weak institutional capacity. From my work with different countries around the world, the gap seems to be real everywhere!

2.3 Countries like the UK recognize that ‘at the heart of good policy is an effective relationship between ministers and civil servants’.ⁱⁱ Yet, even a country that arguably has stronger institutions than most - if not all - developing countries, still feels the misalignment between policy and politics. It’s a real struggle. The table below (Figure 1) highlights some of the key differences between these two perspectives:

Figure 1: Key differences between politicians and civil servants

	Politicians	Civil servants
Predominant perspective	Political	Technical and administrative
Main constraint	Time. Permanent pressure to deliver results fast.	Authority. Ability to put the topics of interest on the political agenda.
Time in office	Short. Political appointment.	Long. They generally have a career in the public service. (Institutional memory).
Scope of interest	Broad. Generally responsible for overseeing the government’s political and policy agenda across one or more sectors and institutions.	Defined. Generally responsible for a particular area.

3. NAVIGATING POLICY MAKING

3.1 In a recent blog,ⁱⁱⁱ I shared five secrets for effective policy implementation. In this brief, I will analyse four of the five secrets^{iv} from the two perspectives - ministers and civil servants

4. Secret 1: Be clear where you are going, and of your goal

4.1 After Ecuador's 2016 earthquake one of the government’s priorities was to ensure that every affected family had permanent housing as quickly as possible. This was an important milestone for the country, as it allowed us to close all of the temporary shelters constructed after the disaster. To achieve this goal, the government planned to build 4,000 new homes for the families who had had their homes destroyed by the earthquake. Civil servants and ministers shared the same objective but with a different sense of urgency. At the time I was acting Vice President of the country, and this was my number one priority.

4.2 **While politicians and civil servants agreed on the final goal, our timeframe was very different.** The timeframe for those of us that were politically appointed was short. The administration was changing in five months. In fact, we were in the middle of an election. This only added more pressure to deliver results. While civil servants shared the goal, their time horizon was longer. Their position was not subject to a change of government administration.

5. Secret 2: Decide how you are going to get there

5.1 **The most useful framework:** I have found to evaluate your policy alternatives is Harvard's Strategic Triangle. I have adapted it into the Public Policy Pyramid. See Figure 2, right.

Technically correct

5.2 **Both sides agreed on the best options to build the houses as fast as possible.** This included the kind of material, type of construction, services required, etc.

Doable

5.3 The housing program was administratively feasible in terms of the economic, administrative, and logistic resources required. From the politician's point of view, everything was in place. In theory, there was no reason why the houses could not be built in five months. In practice, we were not the ones dealing with the administrative issues directly. **From the civil servants' perspective, on the other hand, this was their biggest burden.** Having everything ready, in the shortest amount possible, put a lot of pressure on them and the systems within government.

Politically supportable

5.4 The perspectives of civil servants and politicians were not necessarily opposed, but certainly different. From the civil servant's perspective this was another program to execute. Certainly, the situation provided them with extra motivation. But essentially, they were doing their job as best as they could, within the given parameters. From the politicians' perspectives, the stakes were much higher. This was our biggest burden.

5.5 We knew that if the houses were not done before the transition of government, then there would be problems. Projects would be delayed, if not completely stopped, until the new administration settled in and was confident to continue. That could take months – leaving people without permanent housing for over a year after the disaster. Of course, the administration also wanted to deliver on our promise to the affected communities. It was also an opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of the administration in the lead up to the election.

5.6 **People trusted us, so we couldn't fail them.** I remember in one of my weekly tours to the construction sites a woman in one of the temporary shelters grabbed my hand and said: "Please, help us! I trust my President will give me my house... I am just not sure the others will. Don't abandon us." Personally, to carry the hope of people that lost it all in an earthquake was a very heavy burden. But it was also the reason I was there to start with.

6. Secret 3 - Monitor your progress

6.1 **Monitoring was an important part of our success for house reconstruction.** When the President trusted me as acting Vice President, he said: 'You have to learn to use power. Use your authority to make sure those houses are built on time. People trust us, we can't fail them!' I still remember his words. Development outcomes depend on how power is used. Either to serve the citizen's interests or those of the elites. I believe the former can be transformative and create equal and better opportunities for all.

6.2 **From my experience in the public sector, even if civil servants saw monitoring mechanisms as a burden at first, they also saw the potential they had to achieve results.** For the vast majority of civil servants, working in the public sector is about making people's lives better. When things get done, they can see directly how their efforts contribute to achieving that purpose. From what I saw, getting things done had a mobilizing effect on its own.

6.3 **I used my formal authority to create a powerful synergy between politicians - and other ministers and I - and civil servants to achieve our goal.** I personally visited all the construction sites

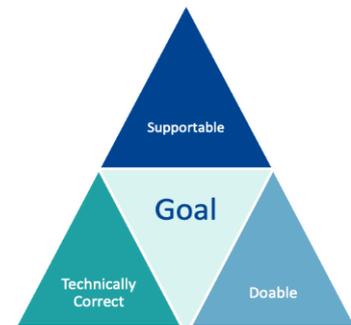


Figure 1: Public Policy Pyramid

weekly to assess progress and take actions if required. Initially, the constructors thought it was beginner's enthusiasm. They soon realized I was serious. Moreover, I set up software and a team to do the monitoring properly. I used my formal authority to leverage civil servants' capabilities. They felt empowered because I was backing them up. Together we made sure the houses were built and all the temporary shelters were closed before the end of the administration's terms.

7. Secret 4: Adjust as needed

7.1 Your ability to adapt will depend on your perspective. If you are a politician, you are the decision-maker. You have the authority to make the big macro adjustments to policy directions including budget decisions and organizational readjustments. If you are a civil servant, that isn't always the case. You follow procedures and implement projects once decisions have been made. Your scope of action is around micro adjustments, like design features of an intervention or targeting mechanisms.

7.2 Communication between civil servants and politicians is essential to get things done. It's key that decision-makers communicate clearly the goals to the civil service. Furthermore, it's fundamental to open a line of communication with those implementing projects. Get their feedback, listen to their perspective, and understand their constraints. In the case of the earthquake, having direct input from the field was essential for decision making.

8. FINAL THOUGHTS

8.1 Effective policymaking requires the right mix between technocracy and politics. Both perspectives are important and complementary. In whichever role you are in, think of what could bring these two perspectives closer for the greater good. A great start is learning to understand the other side's point of view and incentives. Hopefully, this article, and in particular Figure 1, help you to do that.

ⁱ Ngozi Adichie, C, 2009, *The danger of a single story*, Ted Global, July 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

ⁱⁱ Hallsworth, M., & Rutter, J., 2011, *Making Policy Better*, Improving Whitehall's core business, Institute for Government, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Making%20Policy%20Better.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Naranjo Bautista, S, 2020, *Five Secrets*, Better Govs, Nov 3, <https://bettergovs.org/5secrets-blog/>

^{iv} Naranjo Bautista, S, 2020, *Five Secrets*, Better Govs, Nov 3, <https://bettergovs.org/5secrets-blog/>