



HAL
open science

The Civil Service and the Policy of Administrative Modernization in France

Luc Rouban

► **To cite this version:**

Luc Rouban. The Civil Service and the Policy of Administrative Modernization in France. International Review of Administrative Sciences, 1989, 55 (3), pp.445 - 465. 10.1177/002085238905500306 . hal-03456343

HAL Id: hal-03456343

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03456343>

Submitted on 30 Nov 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The civil service and the policy of administrative modernization in France

Luc Rouban

The policy of administrative modernization has been a priority item on the government's agenda for many years. It is strongly propounded and advanced as a necessarily deep-reaching change in administrative culture and mores by both socialist and liberal governments alike. The antithesis of such modernization, it might be said, is that apparent inertia which affects the civil service: seen by state interventionists as irresponsible and ineffective, it is regarded as omnipresent and inefficient by advocates of rolling back the state.

Which is effectively to say that a civil service policy is not the same thing as a policy of administrative modernization, nor do the two necessarily dovetail together. This problem is confirmed by the reforms conducted in other countries: in the United States, the Reagan administration considerably developed cost control management, but encountered hostility from career civil servants. Too severe a budget and staff containment policy coupled with a high degree of politicization led to withdrawal of co-operation, throwing into question the consensus on which the civil service was founded.¹ In Britain, the policy adopted by the Thatcher government to rein in the expansion of the public sector was widely interpreted as 'cocking a snook' at civil servants.² For, generally speaking, 'modernizing' the machinery of state appears, rightly or wrongly, to be throwing into question the 'privileges' (tenure of office, protective conditions of service) deemed unacceptable during an economic crusade. In the longer term, it also calls for a re-examination of the relations between the state and civil society and consequently the mediating role which all civil servants fulfil to some extent.

This inherent ambiguity in modernization policies, which are

Luc Rouban is a senior researcher at the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, CNRS. CDU: 35.08:35.047(44).

essentially directed towards enhancing the productivity and quality of administrative output, is still more acute in France. Three things set France apart from other countries in this regard: the civil service has always been the focus of bitter political dispute and is a prime topic for 'societal debates'; the power of the senior civil service and the 'grand corps' (top generalist corps of French bureaucracy) has long led to administrative reform being tackled from the decision-making angle only (and hence to the chronic neglect of implementation and evaluation); and the public sector is highly developed — more so than in most other EEC countries — and has come to play a crucial economic role since the Second World War.

Modernization policy, therefore, affects not only the social role of civil servants, but also and more profoundly, the political psyche itself. Between 1979 and 1988, in fact, the civil service was variously considered as a relic of the past, a showcase for social policy, a forcing ground of innovation and conceptualization with which to successfully restructure the economy, the vestige of a moribund welfare state and, finally, as assuring some continuum in the state during the era of power-sharing. The 'hall of mirrors' these views resemble indicates no automatic linkage between economic pressure and civil service reform. Rather, account needs to be taken of the constitution of the state and how it is seen in the social arena.

The purpose of this article is to examine the recent reorganization of the articulation between the efficiency/effectiveness imperative and the management of the civil service seen as a singular socio-occupational environment the characteristics of which are always a power issue. This new public policy, introduced in 1983, achieved its full development by 1986, albeit the liberal government found itself unable to put its programme to privatize the public sector into full effect. We need to look beyond the situational causes related to power-sharing, study the origins of this administrative modernization and appraise the process which put it on the agenda. Nor are the new procedural elements of the reform immaterial for they point to a significant shift in the focus of interest in administrative reform: the question of the quality of administrative output is now firmly on the agenda. Be that as it may, many obstacles still remain, and we are entitled to wonder exactly how far the reform will go: in more than one sense, 'modernization' does not necessarily signify a new broom sweeping public management clean.

**Administrative modernization and the policy/
politics paradigm**

Nothing would be more exaggerated than to present the policy of modernization as conducted since 1983 — when the iron of austerity entered the administrative soul — as swept in on a tidal wave of liberalism, a clear and decisive questioning of the civil service and administrative services. The constraints of efficiency and effectiveness may apply no less to the public official himself than to the intrinsic organization of services and management systems. For administrative modernization to incorporate both dimensions, it was necessary to get away both from the clichés of the nit-picking, rule-bound bureaucrat and those of top-down administrative reform. In other words, we are witnessing a twin evolution: criticism of the administrative system is increasingly less directed at the public servant as the visible face of the system; and comprehensive structural reform through some kind of ‘instant solution’ has been more or less discarded in favour of measures adapted to the administrative playing field.

The former point is very clearly illustrated by the perception which public opinion has of the administrative system and civil servants.³

The critical appraisal points to a very broad consensus: 75 percent of those polled (against 15 percent) were favourable to the idea of a large public service regardless of political leanings. At the same time, a large majority thought the public services were not cost-effective: 65 percent against 23 percent, again regardless of social or occupational category or political bias (so 72 percent of respondents leaning toward the political right thought the Administration unprofitable against 62 percent of those claiming Socialist Party affinities). Likewise the question: ‘who do you think is responsible for the problems you experience in your relations with the Administration?’ found only 28 percent of respondents answering ‘civil servants’, but 84 percent claiming ‘cumbersome and complex procedures’. The principal concern is thus with quality of service and relations with the user, seen in ‘professionalist’ terms. Seventy-six percent of respondents thought civil servants were competent, 49 percent (against 42 percent) found departments insufficiently well-equipped, and 69 percent (against 27 percent) thought the Administration failed to attach sufficient importance to relations with users.

As regards proposals for reform, here again two converging streams of opinion were found: one stressing the quality of the

service delivered, and one in which a nascent 'managerial' concept can be discerned.

On the former, satisfaction was expressed, in descending order of priority, with:

1. the fire department (96 percent against 1 percent);
2. municipal services (90 percent against 7 percent);
3. electricity and gas utilities (85 percent against 14 percent);
4. postal services (82 percent against 17 percent);
5. hospitals (79 percent against 18 percent).

The main heads of dissatisfaction, in contrast, were:

1. the inland revenue service (62 percent against 35 percent);
2. social security (58 percent against 37 percent);
3. the state education system (57 percent against 28 percent);
4. the legal system (53 percent against 32 percent).

The dividing line is not between the authoritative and interventionist departments but between those perceived as remote, faceless 'machines', which no-one could come to grips with, and those departments delivering a measurable quality of service through direct contact with the responsible official.

This, albeit relative, development in the management outlook, doubtless not unrelated to the rejection of the neo-liberal solutions advanced by the government from 1986 to 1988, was compounded by the more-or-less permanent shelving of the ambitious plans for a comprehensive reform of the administrative system, where there was an apparent moving away from the idea of a procedural-type solution applicable to all public services according to a single rationale of action.

It must, in fact, be acknowledged that the preceding waves of reform — notably those conducted as part of Planning, Programming, Budgeting Systems (PPBS) — ended in relative failure. The various PPBS schemes undertaken in all central departments between 1970/71 and the mid-1980s were all part of a centralized implementation scheme designed to push through across-the-board reform. It can be summed up as follows: the quality of administrative service and 'product' depends on articulating the policy decision properly with implementation in the field; by forcing central decision-makers to set precise, quantified objectives, by increasing the information flow using computer-based systems, administrative activity is made more transparent and choices can be based on a fully-informed basis as to committed or available resources. The core of the system, therefore, must be budgetary control and management by objectives.

A priori, the PPBS operation had a considerable impact, a recent assessment⁴ underlining that the number of modernization operations undertaken annually under PPBS rose from 33 in 1971/72 to 103 in 1982/83. Gradually, however, a perceptible deflection from the original intent began to occur. From 1977/78, a sea-change became evident in the operations conducted by several ministries (Finance, Infrastructure and Facilities, Interior, Health): actions became more specialized and fragmented; emphasis was laid on the accounting and budgetary aspects; three-quarters of the initiatives were taken by central administration, whereas the original PPBS scheme was based on an extensive move towards deconcentration which fizzled out after 1976. Modernization was also operated in preference through specialized units of the technical services or was abandoned fairly soon after the introduction of new management procedures, notably in the Armed Forces and Education Ministries, through the installation of high-powered data-processing systems. Most important of all was the fact that PPBS operations developed separately from civil service policy. Their immediate impact was to equip the top echelons of general and personnel administration with improved means of budgetary control and personnel management. But civil service staff did not, as such, fall within the ambit of reform, aside from a few 'awareness training' operations in the new management techniques. From 1980, PPBS was confined to a handful of short-run operations, but failed to incorporate the new experiments being developed in various areas. PPBS thus remained isolated from the quality circles and job automation intended to enhance administrative productivity.

The period from 1977/78 to 1981 was therefore one of transition, moving from a phase of modernizing budgetary control and accounts administration to a phase in which administrative modernization was focused chiefly on 'functions' treated compartmentally: accounting, facilities and infrastructure, and personnel management were all the subject of distinct operations. The civil service had ceased to be a central item on the government's agenda. In 1981, however, the civil service became a live political issue: if no real effect could be had on structures, perhaps reform of the administration could be tackled through its workforce. The debate was singularly curtailed, however, and couched in Malthusian terms: the Socialist Government devised the idea of a 'vast public service' as a socio-occupational body drawing democratization along with it and absorbing a measure of unemployment, while

the mythification of schemes operated in the United States led the liberal opposition to dream solely of a civil service pared to the bone handling only authoritative functions. The 'more State/less State' controversy thus obscured the evolution in public opinion described above, dooming any over-sudden or over-simple policy in advance. While the Socialist Government appreciated the risk from 1983, lowered its sights accordingly and opted for finely-tuned austerity, the Chirac government barely had the time to jettison its neo-liberal option overboard before its 1988 defeat.

Seemingly, all the liberal government has done since 1986 is to ratify the strategy adopted by the socialists in 1983–84, reflected in staffing cuts (reduction of the number of posts open to competition; non-replacement of retiring staff). The figures point to no particular breaking point, but to an accentuation of previous trends: 5400 budgeted posts were shed in 1985 compared to 19,102 in 1987. The 1988 Finance Act provides for the shedding of 12,771 civil service jobs — 0.51 percent of budgeted establishment. At the same time, the percentage of government expenditure on the civil service has remained remarkably steady: 39.5 percent of the 1985 state budget against 39.4 percent in 1987.

The 'change of government' has not, therefore, led to an abrupt change in the management of the civil service. On the other hand, the policy discussion which has accompanied these measures has tended to condemn the civil service in no uncertain terms, tending to metamorphose it into the epitome of social parasitism. Civil service policy is thus divorced from social policy. The bitter strikes of the winter of 1986 abruptly revealed the depth of the crisis which, fuelled by other factors (mismatch between supply and demand on the job market, new restrictions on internal promotions),⁵ was rocking the civil service. In 1987, the government dropped its neo-liberal plans and the debate on the civil service developed quickly as a consequence. The discussion over conditions of service in the civil service was thrust aside and a number of surveys were launched in an attempt to delimit the new 'problem'. This was subsequently framed by the government, aided by certain industrial management specialists, in the more modern setting of 'human resources management'.

The State, like business, must and can be cost-effective. Public service can be better defended by achieving productivity gains than by adding fresh departments. It is also the only way to restore the self-confidence of civil servants.⁶

The new policy, as described by the Minister responsible for the civil service, is very clearly expressed as and expressive of a public relations exercise: the aim is not merely to enhance the quality of service delivered to citizens, but also to boost the image of the administration amongst its own employees: 'The Administration has too often been managed like a manufacturing business, whereas what it is in fact is a service concern where the quality of the people is paramount. That calls for job enrichment.'⁷

The same debate recurred after the socialists were returned to power in May 1988:

Vigorous modernization is the only way for the public sector to preserve the full extent of its sphere of intervention. Failing that, the State would meet each crisis by falling back on its primary authority functions. That transformation must enhance the status of the public sector in the eyes of the public and give the agents of the State — the protagonists in a grand design — additional reasons for commitment to their tasks.⁸

The modernization policy has thus been stamped since its inception by a twofold ambiguity: on the one hand it aims to enhance the productivity of public organizations while, in equal measure, maintaining social peace; on the other, it stands as a solution adopted largely by default to the refusal to enter into fresh, long-term structural reforms and the impossibility of subjecting the rationale of the machinery of state to evaluation by market forces.

Fragmented and diversified implementation

Public policy cannot be implemented simply by framing an agenda on the basis of a few ideas or compromises reached to reconcile more or less conflicting demands. 'Operational' conceptual tools are also called for with which both to articulate the reform with governmental plans and to legitimize it in the eyes of those on whom it is imposed. Implementation of the modernization policy in France is founded on a twofold systematization:

1. Public officials are more closely linked with service delivery. The idea of 'user' seems to be taking over from that of 'subject'. We are thus moving from a 'service' rationale to an administrative 'product' rationale. At the same time, emphasis is being laid on the idea of 'profession', with an attempt to avoid the constraints produced by the management of broad 'corps' by paying greater attention to individual responsibilities. One of the objectives is

therefore to remodel the civil service by limiting the role and scope of 'corporatist' behaviour. In 1987, the minister responsible for the civil service set himself the task of reducing the number of top cadre groups (or 'corps') from 1300 to 200.

2. Administrative productivity can only be improved if civil servants are mobilized around it. The level of application of the reform is heavily contingent on that: all trials currently running show that the emphasis is now on implementation rather than decision-making. The modernization policy is visibly geared first and foremost towards the action level. The aim is not, a priori, then, to improve either decision-making or the framing of public policy.

These two main vectors were in part defined as a result of a series of surveys on the civil service and public servant motivation. These surveys⁹ show in particular that:

1. A high correlation exists between the quality of working conditions and motivation. In other words, motivation varies more either way according to whether relations with users are good or bad, or the level of work done than it does as a result of socioprofessional characteristics (age, seniority, status, etc.).

2. Civil servants are content with their security of tenure, but less satisfied with promotion and pay.

3. Civil servants make a fairly clear link between the quality of their personal performance and the service provided to the public.

Three problems appear to arise, therefore:

1. the dissociation of organizational recompense and individual results;

2. a more pressing demand from civil servants for greater account to be taken of their special responsibilities;

3. a relative lack of identification within the organization, leading to both dissatisfaction and demotivation.

Modernization policy thus aims to change personnel management and transform working conditions and methods.

Restrictive personnel management

The personnel management policy applied to all state employees from 1986 to 1988 consolidated a relatively conservative strategy. Certain measures seemed to point towards a desire to create a new form of internal 'competition' between civil servants and between departments.

Hence, the Act of 30 July 1987 relaxed the conditions for using

contract staff. The Act, for instance, authorized recruitment to category A posts whenever 'justified by the nature of the functions or the needs of departments'. The Act also organized the recruitment of contract staff on the basis of three-year indefinitely renewable contracts (but subject to express renewal). The aim of this measure was to avert the creation of new civil service 'corps'.

The socioprofessional status of contract staff has, however, markedly deteriorated. Before 1983, they were employed under indefinite period contracts. Today, despite being one million strong (one public servant in four — although considerable doubt exists as to the statistical accuracy of this figure), they are a comparatively marginalized class. Post-1983 recruits may be faced with the possibility of dismissal without compensation where their contracts are not renewed. Unprotected by the labour laws, they are at the mercy of budget uncertainties, while the tenure or establishment plans envisaged since 1975 have not attained their objectives (only 50 percent of the staff putatively covered have become 'established' civil servants, chiefly in the PTT and education services). As professionals skilled in a specific occupational area, non-career staff nonetheless play a not inconsiderable role in helping adapt public services to the technical demands of modern society (contract staff are mainly concentrated in telecommunications, special education, etc.). This substantial deterioration in their conditions of service, aggravated by the uncertainty over retirement prospects and relatively poor pay levels (compared to tenured staff), has recently led to marked discontent among contract staff.¹⁰

This 'reform at the edge' rationale was taken up again after May 1988. Faced with a rising tide of demands for higher pay from all categories and a wave of highly unpopular strikes (nurses, postmen, railwaymen, teachers), the government negotiated on a 'special case' basis to avoid throwing into question the general conditions of public service employment. The firmness with which any all-round wage rise was ruled out on the grounds of cost containment led to a rash of reactions from trade unions. The unions, little inspired by the modernization policy, condemned the imbalance between the reform proposals and the (financial) resources deployed. By the end of 1988, a gulf seemed to have opened between the civil service policy, centred only on wage claims, and the modernization policy which, on occasion, had to come second to the preservation of social peace. The government

was thus brought in certain cases to tighten up mechanisms it had intended to relax: notable, for example, are the creation of new 'corps' (for air flight controllers and secondary school teachers) designed to offset the career freeze. By early 1989, therefore, a degree of scepticism had set in as to the real possibility of modernization without conflict.

Development of working systems and conditions

Introduction of new technologies. The modernization policy is built around the introduction of microcomputing, breaking with the mainframe-based policy developed under PPBS operations.¹¹ More than an instrument of change, as in the 1970s, electronic data-processing became the opportunity, indeed the pretext, for change.

Government computerization policy to date has been chiefly designed to meet the increasing demand for general administrative services (documentation, legal information, training, audiovisual material) in the face of growing competition from the private sector. It can be most clearly understood, perhaps, in the context of simplifying administrative procedures and forms. Hence, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance developed, together with the other central departments, the introduction of an integrated accounting project (the SIGMA project), while administrative data can be remotely accessed over the Minitel videotex terminal network. Note that government agencies are already the main computerized information providers, offering 58 percent of national database and databank output.¹²

Computerization is at the same time intended to upgrade department-wide communication: two networks were set up in 1986, one in the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Finance and the Budget, the other in the government's General Secretariat. A further aim was to release jobs and create a reserve pool of staff to make good the staffing cuts. The main thrust of the effort went to computerization of routine tasks (such as in local police stations) involving large volumes of files.

As yet, no reliable information is available on the effects of microcomputing in French government departments: more practical training is being done and departments are increasingly better equipped, but nothing as yet points to any marked productivity gains as a result. It should be stressed here that productivity improvements linked to technological innovation are not econom-

ically quantifiable; and the wider spread of new technologies has no level of significance over a collection of services or departments, but requires a case-by-case sociological study of the changes induced by each system of action. Nor, in fact, do we know how to apportion productivity gains between: (1) improved delivery of services to users; (2) improved working conditions; (3) the cost savings generated by computerization.

Defining a policy for administrative innovation: the quest for 'quality'. With the submission of the Sérieyx report to the Minister responsible for the Civil Service in early 1987, administrative modernization took on first and foremost the guise of a 'quality' and innovation strategy essentially based on employee participation in the 'operational' definition of administrative duties, intra-departmental communication and improved relations with users of public services. Using adapted organization management techniques on a case-specific, needs-and-demands-driven basis, the policy aims to stimulate behavioural change and can be discerned as an endeavour to streamline a social movement already in process:

While there is an undoubted increase in the foci of innovative impulsion within the Administration, they are still too few to induce all the behavioural changes required for the modernization of the Administration and its adaptation to user expectations . . . and the expectations of a base little inclined to mobilize its energies around tasks devoid of interest.¹³

According to its originators (H. Sérieyx for the innovation aspect and G. Raveleau for the quality component), the policy should facilitate:¹⁴

1. the introduction of 'administration statements' clearly specifying tasks and objectives, and defined by each departmental head (a technique already systematically applied in the field services of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Facilities);
2. the development of 'quality' indicators to improve understanding of user satisfaction;
3. the setting up of quality circles to impel the information flow between the different statement participants;¹⁵
4. finally, linkage between individual performance and ancillary monetary awards through the introduction of an employee incentive plan stemming from 'performance contracts' (an idea developed in the Arthuis Report, September 1987).¹⁶

The number and variety of actions undertaken is too long to

describe in detail here. Nonetheless, certain common traits can be identified:

1. All are limited 'experiments', generally carried out within a specific department, often in a field service.

2. The operations have an educational purpose, in the main that of keeping civil servants informed (such as on developments in information systems and the benefits they entail), informing the public about the 'quality' of the product supplied ('open days', description of offices, etc.), or, increasingly, organizing working sessions between administrators in the same department.

3. The departments chiefly affected are those responsible for executing policy and in close contact with the public (e.g. the Pensions Department of the Deposit and Consignment Office; local (departmental) directorates for infrastructure and facilities).

Emphasis must be placed on the efforts made to improve internal communication: organization of 'think tank' sessions for bureau chiefs, circulation of house newsletters, regular preparation of activity reports, introduction of computerized newspapers. Side-roads may occasionally be encountered in which strictly professional information is translated into 'institutional'-type information (the organismic lifecycle). In most cases, these operations are conducted under the aegis of the personnel department but may extend to the entire ministry. Hence, the Ministry of Infrastructure and Facilities regularly organizes regional innovation presentation sessions between its departmental directorates. These quality circles and briefing sessions generally go beyond the common benchmark of 'quality' to settle minor organizational problems, identify sources of dysfunctions (e.g. equipment breakdown, delays in file processing, long counter queues, etc.) or even generate cost savings, such as identifying new ways of using equipment. Sometimes, the main agenda item is to sign a 'quality charter'.

The effect of these operations, if not to contribute to the emergence of a new hierarchy, may at least be to encourage a degree of emulation between administrators: thus, 'innovators' are assigned the material and human resources to put their ideas into practice under 'innovation agreements'. The earliest initiative in this area was that taken by the Post Office General Directorate with its 1982 creation of an 'innovation task force'. In 1986, twenty-two regional delegates for innovation were empowered to sign agreements. Between 1982 and 1986, 200 agreements of this nature were concluded within the postal services.

Under this system, success is rewarded by monetary awards (bonuses), but mostly by social recognition (competitions, department-wide information). What these experiments do not reveal is any genuine devolution of authority; to the contrary, in fact, all the information obtained from the departments concerned suggests that the new communication methods need to be accompanied by a new authority-structure behaviour, a 'receptiveness' to the necessary dialogue.

On the surface, the policy has had far-reaching effects: several hundred quality circles have emerged throughout the French administrative system (100 quality circles in 1987 for the Ministry of Finance alone, including five in the Minister's private office); budget appropriations for modernization of the administration have risen from 10 million in 1987 to 13.6 million in 1988, a rise of 36 per cent; 9.7 million was devoted to training in 1988 against 4.7 million in 1987 — a 107 per cent increase. A series of meetings have been organized at regional and national levels to mobilize administrative executives. In 1987 nine regional meetings were held for the express purpose of encouraging the formation of public sector-wide networks to feed central, local and regional government alike. A number of pilot schemes are also under way in the field services. Hence, in 1988 a score of prefectures received support from the Ministry for the Civil Service for the advancement of the new 'quality' policy. At central department level, similar initiatives can be identified for the training of staff in management and communication techniques. Such operations are particularly well advanced in the Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, State Secretariat for Youth and Sports, State Secretariat for Tourism and the Ministry of Justice.¹⁷

What must be emphasized above all is the differential impact of this strategy on the various classes of employee, according to their actual 'professional category' and respective strategic positions. A detailed study of the introduction of the quality policy into the Ministry of Infrastructure and Facilities' departmental directorates (DDEs) is significant in this respect.

This shows that 70 per cent of DDEs introduced co-ordination structures (40 per cent of them with an ad hoc management committee or steering group). Furthermore, 40 per cent of DDEs set up a project appraisal structure (26 per cent of which had a management committee and 4 per cent a steering group). 'Internal diagnosis' operations were undertaken in 45 per cent of DDEs (28 per cent drafting in an outside diagnostician, management consultant

or expert) and 'external diagnosis' (image surveys) was carried out by 30 percent of DDEs. 'Think tanks' were formed in 65 percent of DDEs.¹⁸

This collection of initiatives, designed to win acceptance of the idea of a new relationship with local elected representatives (thereby transformed into 'clients' in their own right in the decentralization context) and to foster departmental productivity (based on a genuine 'marketing' of infrastructure and facilities), must in theory be based on the role of managerial staff in actual management and the participation of all staff, regardless of their level in the hierarchy, in order to profit from the entire pool of available 'social expertise' (knowing the ropes, local demands, local practices, etc.). In fact, a study of participation rates in meetings of these 'study groups' reveals that:

1. senior management did not take part in the meetings in 60 percent of DDEs;
2. no grade 2 managers (or at most only 10 to 20 percent of them) took part in the meetings in 60 percent of DDEs;
3. in 51 percent of DDEs, no grade 1 managers at all took part; and in 37 percent of DDEs, only 10 to 20 percent of such managers participated;
4. in contrast, 10 to 30 percent of subdivisional heads took part in 65 percent of DDEs, and between 50 and 100 percent participated in 15 percent of DDEs;
5. in 91 percent of DDEs, superintendents of works took no or little part (between 5 and 15 percent).

Those most involved, then, are clearly those at intermediate grades of responsibility (subdivisional heads) — the hinge between the performance of field operations and the definition of the infrastructure and facilities plan at departmental directorate level. Senior management seem to shun the meetings and lower-level administrators (works superintendents, workers and technical action officials) hardly ever attend.

This example shows how the 'quality' policy is always part of a specific strategic context (here, the definition of new ground rules with elected departmental politicians), defined on the basis of the type of 'product' supplied and the resources available to the various actors involved.

It would be erroneous to believe, therefore, that initiatives of this nature can bring together all levels of the hierarchy, suddenly on an equal footing. In many instances, moreover, public servants

do not mobilize around the idea of 'total quality' in a rush of enthusiastic commitment. Where resources are scarce and promotion opportunities limited, 'splendid isolation' becomes impossible. These constraints are the stronger in that the 'social aspect' propounded in the Arthuis Report has never really been put into effect. This report, which aims to 'encourage dialogue between employees and their superiors' advocates, as we have seen, 'performance contracts' at field service and departmental directorate (DD) level. For the time being, however, these proposals are based on only a handful of experiences (such as the EDF-GDF [electricity and gas utilities] incentive agreement based on bringing down kWh costs below the target levels set by the two utilities). These management techniques, well suited to industrial and trading services — despite certain regulatory difficulties — have not yet spread to the administration as a whole.

Quality policy, in fact, often appears as a substitute, a necessary transition even, towards far more radical solutions. The dichotomy is most felt with regard to local authorities, where restrictions on resources and the move towards decentralization since 1982 have impelled them to privatize their services. In certain cases (such as the municipality of Angers) the setting up of quality circles to improve the operation of various services (library, lighting, road cleaning, school caretakers, etc.) is seen as an alternative to contracting out to private enterprise. Local direct taxation rose 450 percent in constant francs between 1962 and 1982, and the priority concern in most local authorities is to cut the wage bill, which clearly affects the electorate much less immediately than lowering the standards or raising the cost of services. According to a recent study,¹⁹ 78 percent of the mayors of towns with populations above 20,000 think local people would like to see this head of expenditure brought down. While only some 6 percent of these local authorities are currently applying a redundancy programme, almost all of them are looking for ways to increase the productivity of their services by the introduction of new management techniques and more computerization.

The limits to administrative modernization

The modernization policy as currently conducted covers a panoply of initiatives which cannot be identified as stemming from a single paradigm. Largely implemented by departments themselves (the Directorate for the Civil Service conducts only one staff develop-

ment scheme through the Observatory for Innovation and Quality, backed up by the Ministry of Finance which launched the 'total quality' strategy through the interdepartmental commission on quality operating under its aegis since October 1986), it provides the opportunity for a galaxy of micro-reorganizations. Nonetheless, its philosophy and rationale are sufficiently broadly spread to provide a common backcloth for all these practices. And while it is still too early for a final judgement on the policy, a number of obstacles and limitations are beginning to emerge or being factored into the initial design. They can be divided into (1) conceptual constraints and (2) organizational constraints.

Conceptual constraints

A closer study of the abundant literature accompanying the 'total quality' policy leaves a striking impression of the considerable effort deployed to persuade readers that a real revolution is actually taking place. In other words, the powerful appeals for 'quality', 'innovation', 'marketing', 'new communication' and 'new participative management' contrasts, sometimes strikingly, with the content of operations — most often concerned with action level structures — to improve institutional catering management or reorganize the staff car park. That seems to flow less from a strategy calling for a complete refashioning of the administrative machine than a short-term policy designed to compensate for the barring of career avenues or the increasingly fierce competition for promotion. This new perception of administrative problems must not be systematically disparaged, however, and doubtless requires a fairly lengthy phasing-in period. Substantively, however, it is noticeable that the introduction of industrial concepts (along 'Type Z company' lines, implying Japanese-style participation) into the administrative fabric encounters one major limitation and, perhaps, gives rise to a spin-off effect.

The constraint consists in the absence of any market evaluation; the actions we have looked at, conducted by the various segments of the administration, all stem from internal analysis of the problems and their solution. It looks like nothing so much as a reapplication of a rationale for the same direct and obvious action, completely ignoring all sociological research. For virtually all the 'quality' operations (with the exception of initiatives taken in high-level expertise services) are based on a causality assumption of disarming simplicity: it is both necessary and sufficient to isolate

the 'problem', the operative cause of that problem, the possible solutions and the evaluation grid with which to assess progress. How could we not have thought of it before? Unfortunately, it seems that evaluation — the key to the whole procedure — remains very much self-evaluation or subjective evaluation. No machinery for systematic analysis has been established. Moreover the results announced have more to do with self-satisficing than the attainment of significant objectives: under the 'results' heading of the forms returned by the various administrative departments, the most common types of response are 'our statistical information output takes more account of our outside partners'; 'we have expanded the responsibility and accountability of our staff'; 'greater cohesion has been observed between senior officials in public services'; 'particular attention is being paid to simplifying procedures and forms', and the like. One of the initial effects of this policy thus seems to be the development of standard phrases, a language — a jargon, even — designed by repetition to encourage consistency of behaviour or reflexes.

This form of employee conditioning is probably the source of a powerful spillover effect. In that sense, the modernization policy has had a considerable impact: it has produced a strong identification of civil servants with their department and their immediate work environment. Administrators involved in quality circles do no more than fight 'their' department's or section's corner in a fiercely competitive setting. The effects of this strategy are already being seen in the expansion of a new debate on the now all-pervading institution:

This offers an opportunity to emphasize an idea: that of *the institution* . . . That is the secret of the initiative currently being operated in Cambrai: to give employees a clearer grasp of the totality of the *subprefecture as an entity* in order to position it more accurately in the administrative, social, economic and cultural context of the local environment . . . In that way . . . everyone can stand back from his own situation, get more closely in touch with reality and cleave to *the institution's ambition*: to be useful, efficient, appreciated and sought after; everyone can now take justifiable pride in that *institution* and a marked interest in its proper functioning. (My italics)²⁰

It might be reasonable to wonder, then, whether the institutional culture thus upheld does not run counter to the definition of more flexible procedures and the provision of public services organized to a horizontal rationale as part of each public policy. By multiply-

ing microcosms, tribes, fiefdoms and constituencies, we move away from an overall view of administrative efficiency analysed in functional terms. Administrative institutions again become the central actors in the implementation process. It is clear that, in the longer run, strengthening identification with an institution will put obstacles in the path of any attempt at a radical modification of the organization. Such a policy unquestionably favours minor tinkering and partial reorganizations, but further legitimizes retention of the core structure with which one identifies.

Organizational constraints

The most immediate organizational limitation relates to the scope of implementation of the modernization policy. Applied first and foremost at the lower, action levels, and contributing to the optimization of public service 'professions', it wholly disregards the decision-making machinery. As we saw in the example offered by the modernization of the DDEs, senior executives and top-ranking staff in the elite technical corps of the *Ingénieurs des Ponts et Chaussées* display a very low participation rate in 'study group' activities. Broadly speaking, quality circles are confined to defining operational subordinate goals. Procurement policy, data-processing equipment strategy, budget allocation management do not yet fall within the scope of 'participative management'. Enhancing action level tasks clearly does not lead to the questioning of planning functions or the missions of the top cadres, increasingly marked by growing social elitism (thus, ENA promotions have been cut by half). It is open to question whether reforms which culminate in handing too much power to senior executives and middle management are sustainable. Hence, the pilot schemes conducted with PPBS by the DDEs in the form of 'contracts' with the directorates-general (top management) of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Facilities were discontinued after 1980 in the face of mounting opposition from the Ministry's decision-making centres.

Then there are the constraints related to the fragmentation of experiments: notably the case of computerization of administrative departments, which presumes consultation across a sufficiently broad spectrum to enable real savings to be made. Without interdepartmental standards for the selection of equipment or evaluation machinery of sufficient versatility to assess the true scope of microcomputing (new constraints on staff, purchase of additional equipment, increased training), there is a strong risk of

simply pouring money down the drain (incompatible hardware, unusable software, etc).

The modernization policy cannot, therefore, develop without suitable organizational support. This, however, brings us up against the obstacles encountered by reformers in Britain,²¹ Federal Germany²² and Italy²³, viz.:

1. the difficulty of establishing a central service to study and enhance administrative productivity;

2. the lack of statistical data and sensitive issues (e.g. absenteeism);

3. conflicts between the planning and evaluation rationales of institutions (the choice being between either 'top-down' management or leaving departments free to organize themselves around 'performance contracts');

4. the lack of synchronization between the budget cycle and the definition of regularly evaluable programmes.

Conclusion

Reducing the costs of the civil service, improving the standard of services, deploying new management methods — these are the goals of the modernization policies currently going forward in both France and other western states. What the French case study shows — and what is confirmed by the American and British studies — is how comparatively little room for manoeuvre there is. The issue at stake here is not, as it is for developing countries, to organize a 'modern' administrative system, but rather to improve already highly evolved decision-making and action-taking machinery. This could involve modernizing the administration in spite of the civil service in emulation of, or by transferring certain responsibilities to, the private sector. But that would shift the costs of reform onto the policy decision: opposition from career administrators in the USA to a large extent blocked presidential initiatives. That obstacle can be overcome only by intense politicization of public officials to establish the government's authority (politicization thus becoming an effective way of ranking priorities and specifying objectives). The French solution, aimed at achieving full participation by civil servants in administrative modernization, seeks to preserve the civil service as a separate social entity and the repository of a particular state tradition. In that, it resembles the British experience. But the chief difficulty lies in the fact that that social entity is composed of many representational worlds:

the senior civil service has neither the same resources nor the same interests as local government personnel or the workforce of public corporations. Each institution and profession has its own rules and norms, often unwritten but broadly shared by all the actors developing within it. Modernization policy, therefore, must embrace all these particularisms. Indeed, it tends to magnify them. The cost of reform is then shifted to civil society: claims and demands come thick and fast (working more and better is fine, but in return for bonuses or improved working conditions!) and social unrest hardens. The more visible the differences, the stronger class identification becomes. The temptation then arises to go for furtive adjustments, which may ultimately strengthen, rather than moderate, the bureaucratic reflex. Modernization policy, therefore, steers a constant course between the Scylla of excessive politicization of lower level action tasks and the Charybdis of scattering funds too thinly with no overall approach. In either case, the efficiency of public policy is jeopardized.

Notes

1. Cf. L. Rouban (1986) 'La politique de la haute fonction publique aux Etats-Unis', *Revue française d'administration publique*, 38 (April-June): 291 et seq.; Chester A. Newland (1988) 'Le Senior Executive Service aux Etats-Unis, anciens idéaux et nouvelles réalités', *Revue internationale des sciences administratives*, 54(4): 699 et seq.

2. Note, for instance, the reactions to the leak of Sir Robin Ibbs' report. Mrs Thatcher's plans, announced in February 1987, finally proved greatly toned-down.

3. Based on the findings of the CSA-*La Vie* poll conducted on 5 and 6 October 1987, 'Les Français et les services publics' and the CSA-*Le Parisien*-FGAF poll of 29 and 30 April 1987, 'Les Français et les fonctionnaires'. A nationwide quota sampling of 1000 people.

4. Cf. R. Poinard (1987) 'La modernisation de la gestion administrative: un bilan', *Politiques et management public* 5(2): 65 et seq.

5. On this point, see particularly: J.L. Bodiquel and L. Rouban (1987) 'La dysfonction publique ou la crise du corporatisme', *Revue française de science politique* (August): 539 et seq.

6. Interview with Mr Hervé de Charette (1987) 'L'Administration doit mieux gérer ses ressources humaines', *Le Monde* (14 November): 8.

7. *Le Monde* op. cit. note 6.

8. Office of the Planning Commissioner (1989) 'Plan for 1989-92' intermediate working document (December 1988), Committee on State Efficiency, in *Profession politique* (23 January): 15.

9. For the Ministry of Agriculture, see particularly: L. Dumont (1986) 'Les motivations au travail des agents de la fonction publique', *Les cahiers de l'ITAP* (December).

10. Cf. the article by C. Clément (1988) 'Les contractuels de la fonction publique souhaitent l'amélioration de leur statut', *Le Monde* (28 April): 29.

11. The introduction of new technologies received a decisive impulse from 1984–85, notably from the Interdepartmental Committee on Data Processing and Office Automation in the Administration (CIIBA). On the work accomplished in this area, see in particular the Report of the Secretariat of State responsible to the Prime Minister for the Civil Service (1986) 'La mutation de l'Administration: objectifs et conditions', *La Documentation Française*.

12. On this, see the special issue of the *Revue française d'administration publique*, 'Evolutions technologiques dans l'Administration', January–March 1986.

13. Report by Mr H. Sérieyx (1987) 'Mission innovation dans la fonction publique', presented to Mr H. de Charette, Minister responsible for the Civil Service, February, Conclusion, p. 4.

14. A clear explanation of this programme can be had from the documents published by AFCERQ (the French Association for Quality Circles and Total Quality), particularly the brochure: 'Démarche qualité dans les services publics', *Cahier technique* 9 (1987). Refer also to the comprehensive description given by J. Chevallier (1988) 'Le discours de la qualité administrative', *Revue française de l'administration publique* 46 (April–June): 287 et seq.

15. The glossary compiled by the 'Quality Task Force' defines a 'quality circle' as: 'a permanent and homogeneous small group of volunteers from a single organic unit or sharing common work concerns, led by an immediately hierarchical superior, possibly interacting with a "facilitator", which detects, analyses and resolves problems selected by it concerning the quality of products, services, work life, operations

16. Jean Arthuis, Secretary of State responsible to the Prime Minister, 'Le développement de la participation et de l'interressement dans le secteur public et l'Administration', September 1987.

17. Refer in particular to the review in: Ministry responsible for the Civil Service and Planning (1988) 'La fonction publique de l'Etat en 1987', *La Documentation Française*, 90 et seq.

18. Cf. 'Les DDE et le changement: du mythe à la réalité', survey by the Ministry for Infrastructure and Facilities, Personnel Directorate, *Repères*, No. 3 (1987).

19. Cf. V. Hoffmann-Martinot and J.Y. Nevers (1986) 'Management local: les vraies options', *La Gazette des Communes* 20: 37 et seq.

20. 'Politiques de qualité et cercles de qualité: l'entrée en qualité de la sous-préfecture de Cambrai', Documents of the Cambrai Subprefecture, 1987.

21. See, in particular, P.M. Jackson (1988) 'Techniques de gestion dans la fonction publique britannique', *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 54(2): 275 et seq.

22. Cf. Ch. Hauschild (1988) 'The Quest for Efficiency — The Case of the Federal Republic of Germany', paper to the colloquium on 'Austerité et productivité dans la gestion publique', European Group of Public Administration, Louvain, September 1988, round table on 'La politique du personnel'.

23. Cf. G. Pennella (1988) 'Le rôle de la gestion et l'augmentation de la productivité dans l'administration publique italienne: premiers résultats', *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 54(2): 245 et seq.