



Northern Ireland  
Assembly



Queen's University  
Belfast



The Open  
University



Ulster  
University

## Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Dr Karl O'Connor, IRiSS, University of Ulster

### Abstract

If greater powers are to be devolved to our new super councils, what type of institutions will inherit these powers and how will these powers be used? Existing public administration research would lead to the expectation of greater bureaucrat involvement in the traditionally more mundane aspects of policy formulation, while in areas of greater public and political interest greater political involvement in the decision-making process would be expected. Converse to these expectations, however, evidence from Belfast City Council suggests that the bureaucratic elite are found to play a pivotal role in the day-to-day management of power-sharing within the city. This presentation highlights research findings that identify two 'typologies of bureaucrat' within the Council; and these in turn provide an insight into what guides everyday decision-making. It further explains that the development of administrative capacity within our local Councils is a necessary condition not only for good governance and supporting local councillors, but also for conflict management.

### Research Question:

When greater powers are to be devolved to our new super councils, what type of institutions will inherit these powers and how will these powers be used?

**Case study:** Belfast City Council

**Why?** It is not enough to understand what policy/ies to implement but we need to know how good policy can be implemented

### Findings:

- I Bureaucrats have discretion in certain policy areas
- II This discretion is exercised differently by different bureaucrats but two similar typologies emerge

III Belfast City Council is very competent and demonstrates a high level of professionalism within its administration

### **Implications for policy:**

Council (case of Belfast) is competent to deal with complex societal and governance problems

Studying public administration is important – we need to invest in administrative capacity

The design of bureaucratic institutions is therefore fundamental to conflict management, yet we know very little about how a bureaucracy within a contested society should look

### **Future research:**

The design of bureaucratic institutions is fundamental to conflict management, yet we know very little about how a bureaucracy within a contested society should look

For researchers and practitioners alike, power-sharing is often advocated as the conflict management mechanism of choice. The majority of studies tend to concentrate on political-level arrangements. Although numerous, these references to decision-making refer primarily to political-level actors. The bureaucracy does not feature as an independent variable (where the management of conflict is the dependent variable). While indeed the politico-administrative dichotomy has been the subject of much research within the uncontested society, this relationship within the contested society is less understood.

Drawing on new evidence from Belfast, the study highlights the need also to incorporate a public administration approach into conflict management research. **Taking three broadly defined ‘decision typologies’ in turn, this research finds the bureaucratic elite to play a pivotal role in decisions that affect the day-to-day management of conflict.** The empirical results presented in this research propose that **administrative reform is not simply a condition of good governance but is also a key tenet of conflict management** as the role of the bureaucrat in managing traditionally contentious day-to-day policies increases under power-sharing conditions. Given the opportunity of the bureaucracy to affect conflict management, **a major goal of ethno-politics must be to create an effective, efficient, yet fair and equitable public administration.** Understanding if and how power-sharing has changed the nature of public policy formulation will inform us of the need to take into account the role of the bureaucracy in any transition from domination mechanisms of conflict management to power-sharing mechanisms of conflict management.

**To summarise:** as the mechanism of conflict management has changed from hegemonic control to power-sharing, the environment in which the bureaucrat operates has also fundamentally changed. The bureaucrat has become a co-producer in the policy and conflict management process. Directors and Heads of Service are no longer afraid to target funding where they perceive the need is. Funding is not based solely on political direction. Nor are the needs of the city simply defined in purely technocratic terms by the bureaucrat, they also incorporate the contested nature of the city. The conflict management–conflict resolution process is a function of the bureaucracy. **Developing bureaucratic capacity, although not the sole determinant, is essential if power-sharing is to succeed.**

Where discretion exists then, **do primary associations such as religious, gender or racial identity guide behaviour or are these associations superseded by secondary learned professional or technocratic attachments?** Using the theoretical lens of representative bureaucracy and Q methodology to investigate bureaucrat role perceptions, two distinct bureaucrat typologies are identified in Belfast City Council. The evidence demonstrates that an elite level bureaucrat may actively represent his or her own professional interests or alternatively, may seek out and actively represent the interests of the political elite as a collective. Politicians and bureaucrats from Northern Ireland are perpetually being invited to ‘teach the lessons’ of their power-sharing experience. This research highlights the importance of the elite level bureaucrat in sustaining power-sharing regimes and provides an empirical basis for those seeking to draw on the Northern Ireland experience of conflict management and post conflict governance. The two typologies of bureaucrat found to exist in Belfast City Council are presented below. Reference is made to the various statements presented in the table at the end (statement number is indicated in brackets). These were the statements used to determine typology alignment. For more on Q Methodology see O’Connor (2013).

### ***Typology One: Policy makers and advocates***

This first typology has a good working relationship with the political actors within the city. While those weighing on this typology do not substitute their own political values with those of the political elite (42), they perceive their actions to be legitimate as the political level agree with their decisions and recommendations (22, 26). This typology however does not believe that resources should be allocated according to the wishes of the political level regardless of their opinions (7). Their role is not simply to advise the Minister (10) but to actively pursue positions that they perceive are the interests of the entire urban public (11). When differences do emerge, they maintain their expert beliefs for as long as politically possible (40). While they do attribute importance to the neutrality of the bureaucracy, (28) neutrality is interpreted to mean that all urban citizens are represented by the administration. This typology does not follow the rules of the administration under all circumstances (8). They are not overtly technocratic, accounting for political factors when making decisions (19). Administrators should not be neutral, but prioritise good management and social equity (17). They take the initiative in proposing policies, mobilising support for them and question policies that may run counter to the general interest of the urban population (36). The views of think tanks and international organisations such as the OECD and EU are held in high regard by this typology (41). They actively advocate in favour of policy positions that they perceive represent the needs of the entire urban public (11), and actively advocate in favour of policy positions that address the needs of minority citizens (3). Conflict management is a function for this typology – where differences exist, they see it as their role to mediate and determine a course of action that satisfies everyone (14).

This typology is not overly attached to a particular policy area (44), but instead represents a broader vision for the city. Equity commitments trump policy specific commitments among those weighing on this typology (1, 31), particularly as they operate within a contested city (6). Equity between ethnic groups however should not be a determinant in resource allocation – just because one community is given a resource, this should not be a reason to give the other community the resource (20). This typology also possesses a concurrent commitment to efficiency (21, 2).

The legitimacy of their actions is derived from their responsibility to attain an equitable, fair and prosperous society – not the law, political direction, or their expert beliefs. As indicated by the positioning of statements 38, 33, 18, 32, this typology believes in the public provision of state services and are open and committed to public sector reform. This typology disagrees most strongly with the idea of representing one’s community (primary identity) within the bureaucracy (24, 30, 35, 39, 43, 45, 46). A further noteworthy finding

is the irrelevance the typology attributes to recruitment statements (2, 15). The following quotations from the follow-on discussions give a further insight into the motivations, norms and values of this typology:

'It is only when we bring things to the attention of the political level that they have influence' (Interview 1)

'There is an incapacity at the political level to deal with the more technical stuff' (Interview 2)

'I only present an options paper when cuts are to be political' (Interview 4)

'My area is quite technical...the political level rubber stamp my decisions' (Interview 5)

'I view my role as a coordinator...I put things in a framework in which they can agree' (Interview 9)

'My role is to steer them [political level] in the right way' (Interview 12)

'I have a broader view for the city, as opposed to a political view' (Interview 15)

'My role is to manage the decision-making process' (Interview 17)

'You have to do your homework before Council meetings...I build a relationship with Councillors so they may have confidence in me' (Interview 19)

Those aligning themselves along this typology come from both communities in Northern Ireland. Three were from the Protestant community, while five had a Catholic community background. Three identified with neither community. Two felt British, four Irish and five Northern Irish. Five respondents had a degree and six held a Masters or higher qualification. Four were fairly attached to their religion; four were not attached, while a further three described themselves as not at all attached.

### ***Typology Two: Policy designers and implementers***

Those aligning with typology two see themselves as representing government and see their role as to carry out the wishes of the urban government. Overall they are a more technocratic typology and are inclined to retreat to the evidence in order to persuade the political level to cooperate. Unlike typology one, when there is a conflict of interest between their personal, expert beliefs and those of the political level, they are more inclined to follow those of the political level (25). They are also the most likely typology to suppress their own values in favour of those of the political level (42). Similar to typology one however, they are rarely pressurised by elected officials to alter their expert recommendations or decisions (26). They see their role as to carry out the wishes of urban government (5, 12). While this typology is highly responsive to the political level, they do not simply provide advice to the political level (10). They aim for government that works better and costs less (21). They are against private sector provision of state services (8, 18), but are also less enthusiastic about public sector reform (38) and less concerned with directly representing the interests of citizens than typology one (33). They are also attached to professional norms and values (11, 36, 40), however this typology possess simultaneous attachments to the political level.

While typology one actively pursue broader societal objectives, typology two are more technocratic. They attribute significant importance to their policy area (44). They tend to prioritise the goal of efficiency, providing technically feasible and efficient solutions to the political level (27). This is not to mean that they allocate resources according to technical criteria only (4). Political factors also need to be considered when taking decisions and making recommendations (19). While they disagree with affirmative action (2, 15), this typology are aware of the contested nature of the environment in which they work and like typology one

involve themselves in conflict management, mediating between political differences (14). Unlike typology one, typology two believe that as they operate within a contested city, resources should balance technical and demographic criteria (20). Efficiency is not always a priority (1). In terms of equity, they do not disproportionately represent minority groups (3). Neutrality is highly regarded by this typology (28). Unlike typology one, neutrality is seen more traditionally, being grounded in the law (13) and technocracy (2).

Together with typology one, typology two possess a strong commitment to public service. They are however more rule bound; viewing public service in a supporting capacity to the political level. Typology two similarly rejects any possibility of actively representing their personal communities; their primary concern being to develop an efficient administration so as to be responsive to the wishes of the urban government (2, 21, 12, 5, 25). However, while they are responsive to the political level, they also expect the political level to be responsive to them (7, 9, 40).

Typology two, while incorporating a commitment to professional ideas, are found to agree with a greater number of 'political responsive' and 'neutrality' statements. While not an exact fit, they are therefore closer to Aberback et al's (1981) 'Image III' of the relationship between the political and bureaucratic level – while they are active in implementing and formulating policy, they do try to seek out the ideas of the political level. Whilst taking into account the equity concerns of a contested city, this typology's values lean more towards efficiency concerns. In sum, this typology is less likely to actively represent broader societal goals, and is more interested in actively developing a more efficient administration to carry out the wishes of the urban government. They are however significant stakeholders in the policy design process and significantly influence the outcome of public policy. Similar to typology one they can be described as 'co-producers', however they are more likely to seek out and represent the policy goals of the political level rather than seeking to represent what they perceive to be broader societal goals. The following quotes from the informal interview support these findings:

'I meet with the political level to determine what their priorities are or knowing where they are at...I need to know what tactic to deploy' (Interview 20)

'When Councillors disagree I retreat to the evidence' (Interview 18)

'Generally I like to give a recommendation to Councillors, if there are a number of options I will discuss it with individual Councillors beforehand' (Interview 16)

'I keep the debate technical' (Interview 14)

'Our role is to inform, not to take decisions' (Interview 7)

'My role is to make sure they take a fully informed decision. ...the primary value of the administration is neutrality' (Interview 8)

'There is always a technical basis for decisions' (Interview 14)

Four Protestants, two Catholics and two identifying with neither community weighed significantly on this typology. Four possessed a British identity, one an Irish identity and three possessed a Northern Irish identity. One held a degree while seven had a Master's degree or higher. Again four were fairly attached to their religion, while four described themselves as 'not at all attached'. As with typology one, typology alignment does not correlate with primary identity.

# Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series 2014-15

| Factor Arrays |                |  | Belfast<br>Typology<br>number |    |
|---------------|----------------|--|-------------------------------|----|
| No.           | Classification | Statement  | F1                            | F2 |
| 1             | Efficiency     | If a government employee is forced to choose between the most efficient policy and the most equitable policy, the most efficient alternative should be chosen  | -1                            | -1 |
| 2             | Efficiency     | Bureaucracies should be staffed by professionally trained, technically competent individuals. The most qualified person should always get the job  | 0                             | 2  |
| 3             | Equity         | I recommend or actively advocate in favour of policy positions that address the needs and concerns of minority citizens  | 1                             | -1 |
| 4             | Efficiency     | I advocate the allocation of resources according to technical criteria only – those who need the service should get it   | 0                             | -1 |
| 5             | Political      | My role is to carry out the wishes of urban government   | 1                             | 3  |
| 6             | Equity         | Given the cultural diversity within my city, equity and fairness between various ethnicities is more important than efficiency   | 1                             | 0  |
| 7             | Political      | Resources should be allocated according to the wishes of the political elite, regardless of my opinions  | -1                            | 0  |
| 8             | Neutral        | My role is to follow the rules of the bureaucracy at all times no matter what the circumstances  | -2                            | -1 |
| 9             | Political      | I value the views of the urban political elite, and those positively influence my personal opinions  | 0                             | -1 |
| 10            | Political      | My role is to serve as an expert within my policy area, serving ONLY to provide advice to my Minister/Council Committee  | -1                            | -1 |
| 11            | Professional   | I recommend or actively advocate in favour of policy positions that I perceive represent the needs and interests of the entire urban public  | 3                             | 2  |
| 12            | Political      | In my daily work I represent the elected government of the city  | 1                             | 3  |
| 13            | Neutral        | My decisions are legitimate as I follow procedures established by law and/or secondary legislation   | 0                             | 3  |
| 14            | Professional   | My role is to mediate conflicting interests and find a course of action that satisfies everyone.   | 2                             | 2  |
| 15            | Equity         | Given the cultural diversity of my city, a prerequisite for good governance would be recruitment from all sectors of the community, even if this means that the best person does not always get the job. On the job training can correct this imbalance. | 0                             | -2 |
| 16            | Personal       | I actively encourage procedures that give my community the greater access to the public services that they deserve   | -2                            | -3 |

## Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series 2014-15

|    |                                    |   |    |    |
|----|------------------------------------|---|----|----|
| 17 | Professional                       | Administrators are not neutral. They should be committed to good management and social equity as values   | 3  | 0  |
| 18 | Pro-state facilitation of services | I believe that by putting the interests of business first, benefits will flow to citizens   | -1 | -2 |
| 19 | Neutral                            | In contemporary social and economic affairs it is essential that technical considerations be given more weight than political factors   | -1 | -1 |
| 20 | Equity                             | Given that I operate within a contested city, resource allocation should balance technical criteria (those who need it get it) and demographic criteria (if one community gets a resource, the other should get it too – regardless of necessity)   | -1 | 1  |
| 21 | Efficiency                         | Public employees should aim for governance that works better and costs less   | 3  | 2  |
| 22 | Political                          | My decisions are legitimate as I only follow the decisions of the political level   | 1  | 0  |
| 23 | Neutral                            | In my daily work I represent my department and the wider civil service  | 1  | 1  |
| 24 | Personal                           | In my daily work I value the views of community interest groups with whom I share a personal political affinity   | -2 | -2 |
| 25 | Political                          | When a conflict of interests arises between the wishes of the urban government and my own technical beliefs or the wishes of the political leaders of my personal community, I automatically and unquestionably follow the wishes of the government | 0  | 2  |
| 26 | Professional                       | Elected officials rarely pressurise me to alter my personal expert decisions  | 1  | 1  |
| 27 | Efficiency                         | I see my role as to devise solutions that are technically feasible and efficient  | 1  | 2  |
| 28 | Neutrality                         | I believe that neutrality and impartiality should be the primary values within a bureaucracy  | 2  | 3  |
| 29 | Neutrality                         | My decisions are legitimate on the basis of my technical expertise and by the fact that I provide technically feasible solutions  | 0  | 0  |
| 30 | Personal                           | My role is to achieve the goals of the elected political representatives of my own community  | -3 | -3 |
| 31 | Equity                             | As I am involved in the policy making process, I ought to do so in a manner that advances the interests of those less well off in society, regardless of their background   | 3  | 1  |
| 32 | Pro-state facilitation of services | The best way to ensure efficient public service to the entire urban community is to facilitate the private sector in service provision  | -1 | -2 |
| 33 | Pro-state provision of services    | I believe that citizens needs are best advanced through directly putting their needs first  | 1  | 0  |

## Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series 2014-15

|    |                                 |   |    |    |
|----|---------------------------------|---|----|----|
| 34 | Neutral                         | I am reluctant to assume a leadership role in divisive policy issues. This is the prerogative of elected officials  | 0  | 0  |
| 35 | Personal                        | My decisions are legitimate as I represent the interests of my community  | -3 | -3 |
| 36 | Professional                    | I take the initiative in proposing policies, mobilising support for them, and questioning policies that may run counter to the general public interest  | 2  | 1  |
| 37 | Neutral                         | I know what is legal, not what is right. I stick to what is legal   | 0  | 0  |
| 38 | Pro-state provision of services | The best way to ensure efficient public service to the entire urban population is through public sector reform so that services may be provided equitably and efficiently by the public sector                    | 2  | 0  |
| 39 | Personal                        | Given the recent history of the city, I can of course empathise with the needs of my community – My loyalty is to them and I work for their interests within the legal constraints of the bureaucracy             | -3 | -2 |
| 40 | Professional                    | When a conflict of interest arises between the wishes of the political level and my personal expert beliefs, I pursue my expert beliefs for as long as politically possible                                       | 2  | 1  |
| 41 | Professional                    | In my daily work I value the views of international and specialised organisations such as the IMF, World Bank, EU, OECD, policy specific think tanks and NGOs.  | 2  | 0  |
| 42 | Political                       | In my work I try to substitute my own political values with those of the political elite  | -2 | 1  |
| 43 | Personal                        | My community pay taxes; it is my duty to represent them within the bureaucracy. Other bureaucrats advocate the allocation of resources for their communities, it is my duty to provide resources for my community | -3 | -3 |
| 44 | Professional                    | My loyalty is first and foremost with the policy area, then to my department  | 0  | 1  |
| 45 | Personal                        | Although it is rarely necessary, when needs be I do stand up for the rights and interests of my personal community  | -2 | -2 |
| 46 | Personal                        | I find it easier to relate to Councillors/Ministers from my own personal community. It is only logical – we share a common background   | -2 | -1 |



# Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series 2014-15

## Source of information/Further reading:

### Journals

O'Connor, Karl (2013) 'Belfast revisited: Everyday policy making in a contested environment', *Irish Political Studies* Vol. 28(1) 58-77

O'Connor, Karl(2013) Q Methodology as a tool for committee governance research; *West European Politics* Vol. 36(5) 1073-1087

O'Connor, Karl(forthcoming) What are the ideas and motivations of bureaucrats within a religiously contested society? *International Review of Administrative Sciences*

### Book

O'Connor, Karl (2014) Public administration in contested societies; *Palgrave*

