Machinery of Government in Small States: Issues, Challenges and Innovatory Capacity

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Abstract

Small states present particular challenges to designers of political and administrative systems, and far too often their governing patterns have been imposed by former colonial powers. There are nonetheless excellent examples of efforts to design systems which are appropriate to the needs of the small states themselves. This is explored in relation to the pattern of ministries and departments, the use of executive committees, the structure and size of legislatures, head of state/head of government arrangements, and a range of other machinery-of-government issues. Consideration also is given to factors which can be exploited to develop innovative capacity in small states, and some areas for further research are suggested.

Small states present particular challenges to designers of political and administrative systems. Moreover, since many small states have close relationships with larger ones—for example, relationships arising as outcomes of decolonizing processes—a system tension often exists between large and small. There is a strong tendency either for the larger (“metropolitan”) state to impose its governing patterns on the smaller, or for the smaller to seek to emulate those patterns in a fairly unreflecting way. So it is not surprising that studies of government in small states often seek to explain the differential requirements imposed by the condition of smallness, and to inquire how far arrangements in particular small states have sought to reflect and adjust to those requirements.

This article seeks to identify and discuss the main machinery-of-government (MOG) issues raised by such inquiry, with a particular concern for innovations made to accommodate the condition of smallness. This has been one of the major areas of interest of the IASIA Working Group on Small and Island States and its successor special interest group. The terms “small” and “state” are used in the senses indicated in the Editorial Introduction.
Can types of issues be aligned with types of states?

A leading research agenda item is to try to relate the main types of MOG issues, challenges and innovations identified in the study of small states to types of small states. The expectation is that such “sorting” may prove helpful in subsequent work on small state government systems.

Some such alignments are easy to see. Thus some features are spread fairly widely among small states emerging from the “British imperial tradition,”1 which attracted my initial interest. Other features are more-or-less common to the states emerging from the US Trust Territory. But the spectrum is very broad, and more time and more research are required before any firm conclusions can be drawn. At this stage, it is possible only to speculate: perhaps a grouping according to stages of constitutional development would produce other commonalities—for example, how far would the emancipating former Dutch, Portuguese or Scandinavian small colonies and territories share characteristics with the former British? It is likely that the French would mostly not fit at all, because the French tradition of trying to treat colonies as part of the metropolitan country is so different (Aldrich and Connell 1992); in this tradition the development of self-governing institutions is a much slower process. Or how much would the small monarchies—out of the British, Arab and “small European” traditions—have in common? Of course the small Persian Gulf states (Bahrain, Qatar and, if not the United Arab Emirates itself, the smaller emirates within that federation) may have a number of similar features, but they seem far removed from the others considered here: their lack of legislatures and the heavy involvement of their ruling families in executive government require a very different basis of analysis.

However thorough such an analysis might be, it is unlikely that it would ever produce a set of precepts with sufficient clarity to enable us to predict that a particular set of relationships—or a particular type of innovatory activity—will emerge in any individual case. The nature of political activity is such that interactions between local circumstances and powerful local people are always likely to produce unpredictable variations away from general patterns. Just as organization theorists have come increasingly to accept the message of the “contingency approach”—that appropriate internal structures and processes should be seen as contingent upon external requirements and member needs (for an early statement, see Kast and Rosenzweig, 1973)—it seems that so too must we, in small states’ study, understand that, in the end, “it all depends”!

My initial interest was in the MOG issues themselves. But I soon came to appreciate that I was often considering them in a small states context, and this brought me quickly to inquire what impact the factor of smallness had on the design process. I have found the study of general MOG issues and that of how small states are administered to be mutually reinforcing. I believe this experience echos that of many who have followed the development administration tradition and realized that insights which have emerged from the study of developing countries have enriched understandings of developed countries. Similarly with