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TRUSTEES, NEUTRALS OR HIRED GUNS: A STUDY OF THE EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP AND MANAGERIAL VALUES OF AUSTRALIAN SENIOR COUNCIL OFFICERS

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The employment relationship of local government senior council officers has undergone fundamental changes largely replacing tenured with fixed term contract employment. Many students of public management have argued that the employment of senior council officers on a performance contract basis would cause their loyalty to shift from the community to councillors. This paper reports the results of a survey of senior council officers conducted across Australia which focused upon council officers' perceptions concerning the nature of their employment and the values they adopt in guiding their behaviour in relation to councillors.

The responses of senior council officers show that although most of them are appointed on fixed term performance contracts they never the less perceive that their employment is quite secure. Council officers do not take upon themselves the role of unelected guardians of the public interest. Neither do they respond to the unlawful demands of councillors. The officers surveyed display neutral behaviour wherein they respect their vow of silence, implement council policies even if they consider that they are against community interest and they balance community considerations and political considerations in their advice to councillors. They adopt this behaviour despite their belief that councillors are quite influential in deciding almost all aspects of their employment including renewal of contract.

Introduction

The employment relationship of local government senior council officers has undergone fundamental change with fixed term contract employment largely replacing tenure. Many students of public management have argued that the employment of senior council officers on a performance contract basis would result in their loyalty to shifting from the community to councillors. This paper presents the results of a survey of senior council officers conducted across Australia which focused upon council officers' perceptions concerning the nature of their employment and the values they adopt in guiding their behaviour in relation to councillors.

Current State of Research on Council Officer Values

Most Australian studies of local government have concentrated on their structural aspects (see Advisory Council for Inter- Government Relations, 1984; Richards, 1989; Albin, 1995), on human resource management aspects (see National Review of Local Government Labour Markets, 1989; Howard, 1988; Office of Local Government, Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs, 1989; Libby, 1989) and reforms in local governments

(Aulich, 1995; Tucker, 1997). Almost no empirical studies exist on the public service values of local government managers in Australia. However, in the United Kingdom, Pratchett and Wingfield (1996) completed a multi-dimensional study of public service values in local government. Their conceptual schema has provided a basis for this paper to build upon and further refine (see Pratchett and Wingfield, 1996).

There have been a significant number of studies on public service values in the USA local government sector. Felts and Schumann (1997) examined the extent of local managers' participation in the political process whilst Jurkiewicz, Massey and Brown (1998), compared the level of motivation between public (local government) and private sector managers. Jurkiewicz and Massey (1997) compared motivational factors between supervisory and non-supervisory municipal employees, while Gabris and Simo (1995) compared the level of 'public service motivation' among municipal, non-profit and private sector employees. Menzel (1993) studied coping strategies of local government managers faced with 'corruption' related ethical dilemmas and Menzel (1995) studied the ethical environment of local government managers. In a further study, Berman, West and Cava (1994) compared ethics and management strategies between the public (municipal) and the private sector.

Conceptual Framework

This paper focuses on the values of local government senior officers in the context of fixed term contract employment. The employment relationship within local government in Australia has undergone fundamental changes in recent decades. Although the States vary in terms of the extent to which they have done away with tenured employment for their senior council officers, most of them have by and large implemented fixed term contract employment in various degrees (Aulich, 1995: 95). Senior council officers are mostly appointed on performance based fixed term contracts. These contracts are renewable after a certain specified time and they are subject to renewal upon satisfactory performance. Performance contracts have also led to the detailed identification of the functions and activities of various senior positions in local government and the systematic performance evaluation of senior officers on an annual basis.

Many scholars have argued that fixed term contract employment has the potential to take the loyalty of public managers away from serving the community interests to serving the interests of councillors (Considine, 1988; Parker, 1989; Thompson, 1991). For example, as early as the 1960's, Parker (1961) stated that politicians must get the fullest and frankest advice from their public servants and implied this was the main reason for the security and permanence of public employment – to give them time to become expert advisers and freedom to become courageous advisers. (Parker, 1961: 302)

More recently this focus on serving the interests of councillors or politicians was articulated at the Commonwealth Government level by Tony Ayers (Head of the Department of Defence). He stated that public managers are 'paid to give ministers the advice they ought to hear and not what they wanted to hear and that the risk was that when people believed they could be sacked without any apparent reason and without need, they tend to get the advice ministers want to hear' (Windsor, 1996). However there is hardly any empirical evidence to support either viewpoint. Neither is there any baseline data to suggest the nature of the values which guide the behaviour of council officers in their relationship with councillors. In the context of these limitations, this paper reports on:

- the level of perceived employment security among senior council officers
- the values that senior council officers adopt in their relationship with councillors;

- whether the current senior officer employment relationship has influenced the values they adopt in their relationship with councillors.

Research Design

Before discussing the method of data collection used in this study, the key concepts of employment security and types of values first need to be explored.

Employment Security

Security of employment is a complex concept involving many components. For example, legal conditions of employment may not be reflective of the actual feeling about security of employment. However, it cannot be denied that legal security plays a significant part in one's perception of employment. Employment security is also a matter of perception and has been defined as the perceived stability and continuance of one's employment as one knows it (Probst, 2002: 146).

This research has assessed perceived security of employment of senior officers on a number of components. The first component is the legal situation of employment: whether a senior officer's employment is continuing or based on fixed term contract. The second component is perceived threat and the possibility of losing one's employment. The third component assesses the extent of power a manager has to counteract the threat of losing one's employment. For example, those who are low in power may perceive high levels of employment insecurity. The fourth component is the importance of employment to a manager (Ashford et al., 1989: 804-805). A manager who places a higher level of importance on their job is likely to be more 'responsive' to councillors' demands. Based on previous research (Pullin and Haidar, 2003) conducted in Victoria, a fifth component addresses a manager's options in finding other employment if current employment is lost. A manager who sees high probability in finding another employment is likely to be less 'responsive' to councillors' demands.

Senior Council Officer Values

In order to examine the values senior council officer adopt in their relationship with councillors we have identified three main dimensions. They are object of obedience, partisanship and anonymity. Based on these three dimensions, three ideal type (Weber, 1949) behaviour patterns labelled neutral, responsive and trustee have been identified (Table 1). Each pattern offers a benchmark against which actual behaviour of senior council officers is analysed.

Table 1
Dimension and Pattern of Ideal Type Behaviour

Dimensions	Patterns		
	Neutral	Trustee	Responsive
Object of Obedience	Lawful demands of elected official	The public interest	Elected official
Partisanship	Non-Partisan	The public interest	To elected official
Anonymity	Anonymous	Not-Anonymous to public interest concerns	Not-Anonymous to elected official concerns

In the context of ideal types (Table 1), neutral public managers obey the law and their political superiors conditional upon the latter acting within the law (Armstrong, 1989,

Quinlan, 1993). They are non-partisan, 'party neutral' but not 'politically neutered' (Uhr, 1987: 22) in their dealings with political superiors. Neutrality implies a division of role between public managers and political superiors, where public managers participate in the policy process by providing honest and frank advice. In doing so they take into account the goals of political superiors, the policy merits and the public interest. Public managers may vary in adopting neutrality values. Some may actively persuade politicians to adopt their recommendations while others may consider their job of advice finished with the provision of advice (Keating, 1990). They faithfully implement lawful policies and instructions decided by political superiors, even if they do not agree with them (Hecl, 1975; Spann, 1973; Thompson, 1985). In this relationship public managers are anonymous; they do not make public comments or divulge information except with proper authorisation from or on behalf of political superiors (Williams, 1985; Kernaghan, 1976).

Public managers following the 'trustee' value-pattern see society or the public as the ultimate object of obedience. They are non-partisan in relation to political parties but see themselves as 'non-elected trustees' of the sovereign power. They exercise that power 'with special sensitivity to the public interest' (Buchanan, 1975: 426). Trustees serve their superiors so long as the latter work for the public interest (Jackson, 1988: 247). They promote the public interest in their advice, only implement policies consistent with the public interest and resist policies that are not. Their resistance includes speaking out against mistaken policies, leaking information, whistle blowing, and even secret white-anting from within if necessary (Jackson, 1988). Jackson argues that 'there are occasions when leaking information serves the public interest. Leaking may always be illegal but it is not always unethical or immoral' (1988: 248). Public managers who subscribe to the trustee value-pattern forsake anonymity to promote the public interest.

Responsive public managers also obey their political superiors. However, they do not confine themselves 'to the letter and spirit of existing law' but are 'committed believers who would go about doing whatever was necessary to achieve [their superiors'] policy goals' (Aberbach and Rockman, 1994: 466). Responsive public managers provide advice and information that support their superiors' policy objectives. In this pursuit they might suppress adverse information and even 'cook' data to further the interests of their superiors (Rourke, 1992: 545). It follows that responsive public managers eschew anonymity and would not hesitate to make public comments and manage information to increase support for the policies and goals of their superiors. This describes a public manager who agrees with ideologies of their political superiors and responds to the unlawful demands of politicians on their own volition. Studies of public managers in Malaysia suggested that there could be a variation in responsive behaviour (Haidar et al., 2004). In this situation council officers respond to the unreasonable demands of councillors only under pressure not on their own volition. They may give in to the pressures of politicians but only reluctantly.

Method of Data Collection

Data for this study has been collected with a questionnaire survey. The population for this study comprises all council officers in the 652 councils in Australia's five states and Northern Territory. This list was supplied by Local Government Managers Australia (LGMA). Of this population, 20 per cent were selected as the sample population which yielded 137 councils and approximately 650 council officers. Of the 650 surveys mailed out, 141 surveys were returned resulting in a 20.3 per cent response rate. The sample is stratified to take account of variations by state and territory and by metropolitan and rural/regional councils.

The survey instrument examines the nature of the employment relationship of senior officers and their values. Several research instruments were utilised to develop the

questionnaire for this study: the section relating to employment is adapted from (Probst, 2002; Probst, 2003; Ashford et al., 1989) and the section relating to values has been developed by the researchers, tested and revised from previous studies (Haidar et al., 2004; Pullin and Haidar, 2003).

In most cases the questionnaire used a five point Likert type scale that was sensitive to subtle attitude changes (Zikmund, 1997: 345). For example, respondents were given five choices: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree. For some parts of the questionnaire respondents were asked to state their responses in a scale that included such terms as likely, highly likely not likely not at all likely rather than in absolutes. For the purposes of this paper, responses are in dichotomous terms eg. agree and disagree, however, respondents who were undecided have also been included.

Results

Responses were roughly proportional to the number of councils in states, that is more responses were received from states with more councils. Responses from rural and urban municipalities are quite balanced. In terms of educational background the table shows that a majority of council officers in the survey possess under graduate and post graduate education. Quite a few of the officers have master level qualification. Majority of respondents have more than 11 years of experience as council officers. Officers with less than five years experience constitute little over 16 per cent. This suggests that most respondents have at least more than five years experience as council officers which make their responses highly reliable. Whilst respondents are experienced there is also a balance in terms of age distribution. The most striking aspect of the data is the gender category, where there is an over-representation of males. This profile reflects a workforce where only 10 per cent senior managers are female.

Job Security

The results of our survey concerning employment conditions and job security are presented in Table 2. Only a small minority of senior officers report that their jobs are tenured. Overwhelming majority of senior officers report that they are employed under fixed term contracts which means that their jobs are at least legally insecure. This also means that their employment contracts are subject to renewal on a periodic basis with a possibility that they may lose their employment.

Table 2
Level of perceived job security

	Likely %	Unlikely %	Neither %
Looking to the future what is the probability that you may lose your employment	9.2	70.9	19.9
If you lose your current employment what is the probability that you would get another employment	87.9	5.0	7.1
	Agree	Disagree	Neither
I understand this organisation well enough to prevent negative things happening to my employment	66.6	8.5	24.8
I would do anything to keep my employment	4.9	75.9	19.1
	Continuing	Fixed term contract	Others
My employment is	24.1	75.2	0.07

However, this legal situation regarding senior council officer employment presents a deceptive picture because the majority of the public officers perceive that their jobs are in reality quite secure. For example almost 71 per cent of senior officers report that it is unlikely that they would lose their employment although they are employed under fixed term contracts. The probability of finding another employment and their possession of power to stop negative things happening to their employment makes them even more secure in their employment. As Table 2 shows, almost 88 per cent of the senior council officers perceive that they would have little difficulty in finding other employment if they lost their current employment. In addition to this almost 67 per cent of senior council officers believe that they are powerful enough to stop negative things happening to their employment. This perception of high level of overall security in their employment must be one of the major explanations in almost 76 per cent of the senior council officers reporting that they would not do just about anything to keep their employment. In summary, it can reasonably be concluded that although majority of senior council officer reported that they are employed under fixed contracts, they perceive that their employment is quite secure.

Trustees of the Community Interest

The values senior council officers adopt has been profiled on three patterns - trustee, neutral and responsive. The first part of the report discusses whether senior council officers view themselves as trustees of the community interest and this has been assessed by six statements (Table 3).

Table 3
Are they Trustees?

	Agree %	Disagree %	Undecided %
Make unauthorised public comment about council policies that are not in the community interest.	3.5	94.3	2.1
Disclose unauthorised information about council policies that are not in the community interest.	3.5	95.0	1.4
Hide official information about council policies that are in the community interest.	4.3	92.1	3.6
Only implement council policies that are in favour of the community interest.	7.8	82.9	9.3
Only consider the public interest when providing policy advice to council.	27.1	65.0	7.9
Having provided my policy advice I actively persuade councillors to adopt policy recommendations that I believe best serves the community interest.	78.6	16.4	5.0

Senior council officer responses to all questions unequivocally indicate that they do not see themselves as trustees of the community. For example, their responses to the first three questions indicate that majority would not make unauthorised public comment nor would they disclose unauthorised information nor hide official information even if they believe that such actions would promote community interest. Almost 83 per cent of the senior council officers would not hesitate to implement council policies that are not in favour of the community interest. Their response to statement five indicates that to the majority (65%) of council officers, community interest is not the only consideration in their advice to councillors. However, whatever advice they provide, a large majority would actively persuade councillors to adopt policies that they believe serves the community interest.

These results are similar to those found in several studies in the USA. Jurkiewicz and Massey (1997) in a study of local government managers in the departments of public works, fire, police and administration of five municipalities situated in the Mid-western metropolitan area in the USA found that ‘municipal employees are more concerned with job security, salary, and opportunities for personal and professional advancement than they are with benefiting society, teamwork, or autonomy’ (367). They report that ‘Chance to benefit society’ was ranked 7th by supervisory and 10th from among 15 motivational factors by non-supervisory level municipal employees (Jurkiewicz and Massey, 1997, 370).

In a later comparative study of employees in public including local government and private sector, Jurkiewicz and others (1998) found that ‘private sector employees assign a higher rank to ‘chance to benefit society’ than do their public sector counterparts’ (236) and the authors comment that the ‘ethic of public service’ has gone to the private sector (245). In a comparative study of managers of municipal, non-profit, and private companies, Gabris and Simo (1995) found that public managers work in the public sector ‘because it represents a presumably secure job that satisfies basic extrinsic needs, rather than because it ameliorates a vague intrinsic need for serving the public’ (41).

Similar findings have also been reported from studies of managers at state and federal levels in the USA. Public managers compared to private sector managers have been found to have less ‘job involvement’ (Buchanan (1974, 1975) less ‘work involvement’ (Emmet and Taher, 1992: 46; Yeager, Rabin and Vocino, 1982: 407). However, there are also other studies at federal and state levels in the USA where public managers have been found to have placed lower importance to monetary incentive and higher importance to work that is worthwhile to society (Rainey, 1992: 288; Posner and Schmidt, 1996: 281; Kilpatrick, Cummings and Jennings, 1964 in Bozeman, 1987: 19)¹.

Responsiveness to Councillors

The question then is if they do not adopt trustee values; do they adopt responsive values. As has been argued above, managers can be responsive to councillors willingly or under pressure. Managers are responsive willingly when they agree with ideologies and values of councillors. First we assess whether they are responsive willingly

Table 4
Are they Responsive Willingly?

	Agree %	Disagree %	Undecided %
Make unauthorised public comment in support of the political interests of councillors.	1.4	95.7	2.9
Disclose unauthorised information in support of the political interests of councillors.	0.7	98.6	0.7
Hide official information which could damage the political interests of councillors.	1.4	90.0	8.6
Only implement policies that promote the political interests of councillors.	1.4	95.7	2.9
Frame and limit my policy advice to suit the political interests of councillors.	1.4	96.4	2.1

Senior council officer responsiveness to the whims and unlawful demands of councillors has been assessed with five statements. The answer is quite unequivocal as Table 4 shows. More than 90 per cent of senior council officers in all their responses to the questions indicate that they would not breach their vow of silence in support of councillors, nor do they promote

political interests of councillors in the implementation of council policies nor do they restrict their policy advice to promote the political interest of councillors. If they are not responsive willingly, do the council officers give in when councillors ask them to do things that are unlawful or unreasonable?

Table 5
Are they Responsive Reluctantly?

	Agree %	Disagree %	Undecided %
Make unauthorised public comments when I am under pressure from councillors to do so.	1.4	95.0	3.6
Disclose unauthorised information when I am under pressure from councillors to do so.	1.4	95.7	2.9
Hide official information when I am under pressure from councillors to do so.	2.1	92.1	5.7
Implement unlawful requests from councillors when I am under pressure from councillors to do so.	2.1	97.1	0.7
Frame and limit policy advice to suit the political interests of councillors when I am under pressure from councillors to do so.	2.1	92.9	5.0

Table 5 shows that responses of the senior council officers surveyed are even more unequivocal in their disagreement. More than 92 per cent of our respondents disagreed with all five questions that assessed whether they give in to the pressures of councillors to do unlawful acts. The overwhelming majority of senior council officers report that they do not breach their vow of silence nor do they entertain unlawful requests from councillors in the implementation of council policies nor do they restrict their policy advice to promote the political interest of councillors even when they are under pressure from councillors.

Neutrality and Senior Council Officers

Respondents indicate that they are neither completely trustees nor are they responsive (to unlawful councillor demands) as council officers. The question then is what behaviour they adopt.

Table 6
Are they Neutral?

	Agree %	Disagree %	Undecided %
Never make unauthorised public comment even if council policies are against the community interest.	87.0	6.5	6.5
Never make unauthorised disclosure of official information.	86.9	7.2	5.8
Hide information when the law requires me to do so.	50.2	24.6	24.6
Implement all legally constituted council policies, even if they are against the public interest.	79.0	7.2	13.8
Consider both the public interest and the political interests of councillors when providing policy advice to council.	65.2	28.7	6.5
Having provided my policy advice I do not really care whether councillors accept my recommendations or not.	37.2	51.4	11.4

Senior council officers' adoption of neutral behaviour has been assessed with six statements (Table 6). Their responses to statement one to four clearly indicate that they adopt a behaviour

that is lawful. The strongest possible expression of their neutral behaviour is demonstrated by their agreement with the statement four where they agreed that they implement all legally constituted policies even if they are against public interest. The majority of council officers also report that they consider both public interest and the political interest of councillors in their advice to councillors. This is quite consistent with their statement 5 in Table 3 where they say that public interest is not their only consideration in providing policy advice to councillors. Responses of officer to statement 6 in Table 6 and their responses to question six in Table 3 are also quite consistent. In their responses to these two statements they are saying that they do their best to persuade councillors to adopt a policy that they believe is conducive to community interest.

Felts and Schumann (1997) in a study of local government administrators in South Carolina found that 'administrators do not see themselves as political actors, per se, exercising political discretion by making choices. Rather they opt for a more neutral and perhaps a safe role. They regard their role in a more limited way, that is providing additional technical information to those they see enmeshed in a conflict' (367). Maranto and Skelley (1992) in a study of public managers of the Washington offices of 15 federal organisations representing defense, regulatory and social welfare found that '...adherence to the neutral competency notion appears to be almost universal and not dependent on organisation's cultures and the policies they support' (178). Career public servants expressed the belief that they 'should accept the direction of political appointees even if they disagree with it' (Maranto and Skelley, 1992: 176). They felt that they should 'voice objections in-house first. If this is not possible, they should probably seek another work assignment or position, or even 'run for office' (Maranto and Skelley, 1992: 177). Majority of career officials think that it is 'improper to leak controversial administration initiatives to interest groups or congress' (Maranto and Skelley, 1992: 177).

Discussion

Council officers are not completely trustees nor are they responsive to councillors. Indeed, they are anything but responsive to the unlawful demands of councillors. Council officers demonstrate neutrality values. They adopt these values despite the fact that most of them are appointed on fixed term legal contracts. There are several possible explanations of these findings. One explanation that is supported by the current study is that council officers can afford not to be responsive because they perceive that they are quite secure in their jobs. Although the majority reported that they are employed under fixed term legal contracts which mean that there is no guarantee in the continuation of their employment, they do not believe that they would lose their employment. Moreover, they believe that they would almost certainly find other employment if they lose their current employment. This perception of security of employment is at least one of the explanations behind officers not adopting responsive behaviour.

Maranto and Skelley (1992) pointed out, based on Wamsley et al. (1990), that the neutrality principle persists because 'it confirms the obvious - a division of labour - in public service between careerists (defined in terms of time, profession, and service) and the political appointee' (42). Furthermore, Helco (1977) identifies that neutrality persists because it is fundamental to what is called the 'civil service idea'. The neutrality ethic draws a sharp distinction between the managers and councillors and provides public managers with 'identity and uniqueness' (in Maranto and Skelley, 1992: 184).

The neutrality ethic is a prudent principle from the self-interest perspective of public managers. A manager with neutrality orientation can hold on to a job longer than a responsive manager or a trustee as the neutral manager can continue working for many political groups

while a responsive manager or a trustee can only work for a political group that agrees with his or her views and attitudes. Neutrality as an ideal is 'more understandable and functional for career executives than other ideals such as 'public service' or 'public interest'' (Maranto and Skelley, 1992: 184). Neutral managers, by distancing themselves from ready identification with any particular group and from intrigues, can 'preserve their reputation for indispensable competence and fairness' (Caiden, 1996: 21). The performance contract system may in fact reinforce a neutrality ethic. Managers following a neutrality ethic may be more likely to have their contracts renewed despite changes associated with regular electoral cycles.

The neutrality ethic as Caiden argued also fits in with certain personality types and for them it has remained a 'beguiling idea'. Principles of neutrality ethic fit very well with people who prefer not to take risks, hate practical politics and yet desire comfort, security, and upward mobility (Caiden, 1996: 22-23). Politicians are the people who take risks and engage in the political gamble but when running governments they need the 'neutral' manager who can advise, remain anonymous and look after the details of management (Caiden, 1996: 26).

Concluding Comments

Many authors have argued that recent changes in the public sector employment relationship are likely to negatively affect the trustee ethic among public managers. Given the lack of major research in the area, it is difficult to comment. A study of council officer values in Victoria Australia does not support such a relationship (Pullin and Haidar, 2003). Two other studies indicate only a very weak or no relationship between these two variables. Weller and Wanna (1997) found that changes to the employment relationship at the commonwealth level in Australia have not really affected the standard and level of advice that commonwealth public managers provide to their ministers (22). Romzek (1985) in a study of 484 federal, state and local government employees in the USA report that 'job security' is not strongly related to 'organisational involvement' on the part of public servants (287).

However, one must ask a more fundamental question: is there a relationship at all between nature of the employment relationship and the values public managers adopt in their working relationship with ruling politicians? Many argue that the employment of public managers on fixed term contracts would make them responsive to councillors. Our data does not support such an association. One could argue that there is no logical association between them either (Clark, 1959). The claim that there is an association between the nature of employment on the one hand and the values of managers on the other is too simplistic because the values public servants adopt in this relationship are likely to be influenced by a range of other factors including personality, ethnicity, upbringing and religious background (Ossowska, 1971; Williams, 1985).

End Note

1. Rainey cautioned that 'service motivation' i.e. the duty to serve public interest may only be distantly related to such concepts as motivation, 'reward preferences', 'levels of organisational involvement' or 'organisational commitment', job involvement, professionalism, altruism, or pro-social behaviour. He argued that these concepts may even clash with the concept of public service motivation (1992: 298-99).

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