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## How civil servants serve a hated master

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For a brief moment this spring, it seemed the NDP and Liberals might cobble together a ruling coalition. As speculation mounted, I wondered how the town's senior civil servants would respond.

In Ottawa, the civil service is, in theory, a neutral administrative tool. In reality, of course, civil servants have scruples and ideologies just like the rest of us. Individual opinions matter, particularly in the upper ranks, as senior civil servants are expected to be role models. Thus, when serving a government whose policies they personally dislike, senior civil servants can't help but face a powerful ethical choice: lead with enthusiasm, secretly resist, or resign? Economist Albert Hirschman nicely laid out the choices in his classic text, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*: keep one's mouth shut (Loyalty); protest forcefully from within (Voice); or leave (Exit).

Hirschman's options were on my mind these last few years as more and more civil service acquaintances complained about serving their Conservative political masters.

For some, the most painful of Stephen Harper's policies was Canada's handling of the alleged torture of Afghan detainees. For others, it was his odd support for radical Zionism, his opposition to gender equity, or his policies on third-world maternal health, an international ban on cluster munitions, or on climate change. Most of the civil servants I knew detested at least one Conservative policy; many hated the entire package.

My circle of acquaintances is small, and I make no claims to statistical precision. No doubt there are many bureaucrats in the system who implement Conservative policies in good conscience. But my concern is with the ethical dilemmas of individuals working for large bureaucracies whose policies they dislike. I am particularly concerned with the men and women working in the government departments I am most familiar with: foreign affairs, international development, and defence.

This interest stems from personal experience. I grew up in Israel during the 1980s, in a period when debates over individual morality and government policy were commonplace. A radical-right government had launched Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon and was building Jewish settlements throughout the Palestinian West Bank. These policies, in turn, helped prompt the first Palestinian uprising and its brutal consequences.

In those years, I learned that individual resistance to bad policies mattered, and

was personally inspired by soldiers and bureaucrats who publicly voiced their criticisms and refused to carry out policies they deemed immoral.

I reached my own personal red line in 1991, when I refused to participate in my military reserve unit's manoeuvres in the occupied territories. I could have been sent to prison, but my commanders avoided controversy by losing the paperwork.

That incident, in turn, drove home a second lesson: the higher your organizational status, the more the system feared your ethically based resistance. My military reserve unit was an elite combat formation, and my commanders had no interest in turning my refusal into a cause célèbre.

The dilemmas faced by Ottawa's bureaucrats are not typically so dramatic, although the Afghan detainee scandal comes close. The basic moral dilemmas, however, are the same. Where does each individual draw the line? When, if ever, does one move from Loyalty, to Voice and then to Exit?

These questions are especially acute for the organization's elite, since it is they who are expected to lead by example and demonstrate enthusiasm for current policy.

To better comprehend the bureaucracy's response to Harper's policies over the past few years, consider this.

Canada's civil service prizes discretion, and in Ottawa, a tacit Code of Silence prevents most bureaucrats from speaking out within or outside their organization. If you keep quiet and help your superiors look good, you will be promoted. If you protest too often, however, your career will come to a grinding halt.

And while civil service jobs are not wildly well paid, they are well worth having. They offer job security, excellent benefits, a well-defined career ladder, and endless opportunities for promotion, growth, and change. When bureaucrats voice opposition to policies they dislike, however, they quickly find themselves denied opportunities for professional advancement.

Given all this, it is hardly surprising that only a handful of policy leaders exercised the Voice option during Harper's minority government; call these the Public Dissenters. The system, as best I can tell, made short work of these brave souls.

A second small group was the Private Dissenters, people who refused to implement Conservative policies, but who also maintained the Bureaucrat's Code of Silence. These folks took unpaid leave or early retirement, viewing silent Exit as their best option.

The third and largest group was the Stoics, individuals who engaged in Loyal behaviour even though they personally hated Conservative policies.

How do the Stoics do it? For starters, many Stoics felt that the Conservative policies they most detested originated elsewhere in the bureaucracy; as a result, the policies presented no personal moral dilemmas. Bureaucrats who reviled the handling of Afghan detainees, for example, could feel personally uninvolved if they did not work for the ministries of defence or foreign affairs.

Still other Stoics belonged to those two ministries, but felt ethically removed from the issue because they did not personally work on the detainee file.

In both cases, an ethically convenient bureaucratic division of labour diminished individuals' sense of personal obligation.

Another common Stoic approach was to say that despite increasingly tight Conservative supervision, it was still possible to do good things at the office.

Thus, for example, development officials who disliked the broader Conservative approach to international aid felt able to promote the anti-poverty policies they liked in their own country of responsibility. Again, a division of bureaucratic labour diminished individuals' sense of personal responsibility.

Finally, there were those Stoics who said that they were holding on until the end of Conservative minority rule. Harper, these Stoics said, was bound to lose a parliamentary vote sometime soon.

All these arguments make rational and ethical sense. Still, they all leave one crucial question unanswered: Where would each Stoic draw the line? What would the Harper government need to do for each one of them to exercise Voice or Exit, rather than quiet Loyalty?

Consider the Afghan detainee case. The number of innocent persons tortured due to Canadian policy may have numbered in the hundreds. What would it take to trigger Voice or Exit by Stoic officials in the ministries of defence and foreign affairs? The torture of 1,000? Of 10,000?

In theory, everyone has a moral red line. In most large bureaucracies, however, the structures of work, promotion, and authority are such that personal ethical considerations are easily pushed aside. Many Stoics, in other words, are unthinking Loyalists, unconsciously sidestepping painful moral choices.

There is, of course, a fourth group of bureaucrats, the people who told their friends that they disliked Harper's policies, but who then enthusiastically enforced Conservative policies at the office. Let's call them the Opportunists.

Before the NDP/Liberal mirage faded, I enjoyed speculating how each of these four groups might react to leftist rule. Would the Dissenters return from exile, and if they did, would they purge the Opportunists, and perhaps even some Stoics? Would the Opportunists head for the bleachers, or would they simply switch uniforms and play for the opposing side? Would the Stoics begin claiming that they had been courageous and vocal opponents of Conservative policy all along?

Governments come and go, and senior public servants will always be asked to implement policies they dislike. Loyalty, Voice and Exit are their options, and each person will have to discover his or her own red line.

The only truly bad option is not to think about this at all; after all, a life unexamined is a life not worth living.

Bureaucrat, know thyself.

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August, he will be the University of Minnesota's Stassen Chair of International Affairs, and a visiting professor at the Centro de Investigacion y Docencias Economicas in Mexico City.

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