



***On Bureaucratic Centre Formation  
in Government Institutions  
Lessons from the European Commission***

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## Abstract

Identifying and explaining bureaucratic centre formation within government institutions – such as the European Commission (Commission) – is essential for understanding political order and the potential and limitations for public sector governance. Benefitting from a new body of interview data this article adds two key observations: First, bureaucratic centre formation in the Commission does not profoundly penetrate the Commission as a whole. Comparing officials from the Secretariat General and DG Trade, this study suggests that bureaucratic centre formation is primarily happening within the Secretariat General and only marginally penetrating DG Trade. Two behavioural logics tend to co-exist within the Commission administration, albeit embedded and layered within different organisational sub-units. Variation in bureaucratic centre formation is associated with two key variables: (i) the accumulation of relevant organisational capacities at the bureaucratic centre, and (ii) the vertical and horizontal specialisation of the Commission administration. Thirdly, these findings hold when ‘controlling for’ recent managerial reforms inside the Commission. The article illustrates that despite recent Commission reforms, some core behavioural logics among Commission officials are *not* profoundly transformed.

## Key words:

Administrative reform - autonomy - centre formation - European Commission  
- New Public Management

## **Points for practitioners**

The administration of the European Commission is seen as increasingly steered from the executive centre – that is from the President and the Secretariat General. This study, however, makes two main observations: First, it shows that the strengthening of the executive centre inside the Commission administration (the Secretariat General) is not echoed throughout the services of the Commission. The ambition to make the Secretariat General the service centre for the Commission President is currently not profoundly penetrating and transforming the every-day activities of the Director Generals (DGs). Secondly, the study shows that despite historic administrative reforms of the Commission, the every-day behaviour of Commission officials remains basically unaffected.

## Introduction<sup>i</sup>

Identifying and explaining bureaucratic centre formation within government institutions – such as the European Commission (Commission) – is essential for understanding political order and the potential and limitations for public sector governance. Bureaucratic centre formation combines an *ambition* to centralise executive powers as well as the *de facto* concentration of *power resources* around executive leaders. The strengthening of executive powers is comprehensively documented within national governments – notably enhancing the role of Prime Ministers' and Presidential Offices (e.g. Poguntke and Webb 2005) – thus reasserting centres of executive government (Christensen and Lægveid 2007). A vast literature on state building has demonstrated how the extortion of new executive centres tends to involve delicate balancing acts between creating action capacities for the standardisation and penetration of the territory and concerns for local autonomy (essentially Rokkan 1999).

This article asks whether bureaucratic centre formation as observed in the Commission profoundly penetrates the Commission administration as a whole. Empirically we ask to what extent perceptions of bureaucratic centre formation (a behavioural logic of hierarchy) are acted upon among Commission officials at the sub-unit levels of the Commission, subsequently weakening an inherent behavioural logic of portfolio within these sub-units? This question responds to a call for studying the impacts and the longer-term implications of administration reforms of the Commission for EU governance and policy-making, ultimately changing EU's capacity to govern (Ongario 2010).

Bureaucratic centre formation and sub-unit autonomy is assessed among a carefully selected sample of Commission officials inside two Commission DGs: The Secretariat General (SG) – representing the bureaucratic centre –, and DG Trade – representing bureaucratic sub-units. The analysis benefits from a body of interview data (N=74) among permanent and temporary Commission officials in these DGs. A logic of hierarchy suggests that Commission officials upgrade common agendas, co-ordinate actions of sub-units, abide to steering signals from 'above', downplay inter-service conflicts and turf-wars, reduce sub-unit allegiances, and emphasise the concerns and considerations of the bureaucratic centre. A logic of portfolio safeguards informed decisions and due administrative practices, emphasises divergent agendas, co-ordinate actions inside sub-units rather than across them, emphasise signals, concerns and considerations of their sub-unit, and pay loyalty primarily towards the sub-unit. These behavioural logics highlight managerial and Weberian logics, respectively, emphasising competing understandings of bureaucratic

organisation, administrative behaviour, and bureaucratic change (Ongario 2010). Balancing these logics confronts one classical dilemma in bureaucratic organisations between instrumental design and bureaucratic centre formation versus bureaucratic differentiation and sub-unit autonomy as highlighted by the Neo-Weberian model (Ongario 2010; Verhoest et al. 2010).

The study adds two key observations:

- First, bureaucratic centre formation inside the Commission does not seem to profoundly penetrate the Commission administration as a whole. Reflecting the Neo-Weberian model outlined by Ongario (2010), two behavioural logics tend to co-exist within the Commission administration, albeit embedded and layered within different organisational sub-units. A portfolio logic seems to be overwhelmingly present within policy DGs – such as DG Trade. The portfolio logic serves as the foundational dynamic at the heart of DG Trade and it seems to be activated fairly independently of bureaucratic centre formation at the helm of the Commission. This observation echoes images of the Commission administration as fragmented with weak capacities for hierarchical steering accompanying inter-service ‘turf wars’ that is marginally compensated by presidential control and administrative integration (e.g. Commission 1999; Coombes 1970; Egeberg 1996; Page 1997; Spinelli 1966, Trondal 2008). The Commission has been pictured as organisationally segmented (Hooghe 1997; Page 1997: 135) and with an alleged ‘management deficit’ (Metcalf 1992; Levy 2006). This study, however, suggests that this inherent logic of portfolio is currently challenged by bureaucratic centre formation in the Commission SG. Moreover, the relative primacy of these behavioural logics is associated with two explanatory variables (see Helms 2005):
  - The accumulation of relevant organisational capacities at the bureaucratic centre
  - The vertical and horizontal specialisation of the Commission administration
- Secondly, these findings hold both when comparing permanent and temporary Commission officials, and when ‘controlling for’ recent managerial reforms inside the Commission. First, notwithstanding temporary officials’ ambiguous and short affiliation towards the Commission administration this study shows that their behavioural logics are profoundly mediated by the formal structure of the Commission administration – similar to permanent Commission officials. Secondly, recent reforms of the Commission administration

have been described as historic, profound in depth, and wide-ranging in scope (Barzelay and Jacobsen 2009; Bauer 2009; Schön-Quinlivan 2006). However, re-engineering a large Commission administration is not done overnight. Despite ambitious policies to modernise and reform the Commission during the last decade, this study suggests that the results are modest as regards transforming some core behavioural logics among Commission officials. These findings resonate with studies suggesting that reforms of government institutions are not always effectively accompanied by a subsequent change of decision-making practices (Olsen 2010). Bureaucratic centre formation inside the Commission is a fairly recent phenomenon that has not profoundly altered core behavioural logics among the staff. Bureaucratic centre formation – as in the Commission – tend to be profoundly mediated by pre-existing politico-administrative orders – by the ‘genetic soup’ of pre-existing organisational structures (Olsen 2010: 96).

The article proceeds in the following steps. The next section outlines a theoretical departure that contributes to a conceptualisation and explanation of bureaucratic centre formation in government institutions. The empirical section assesses and explains bureaucratic centre formation in the Commission – and how Commission officials balance two core behavioural logics in everyday work.

## **Theoretical departure**

### **Dependent variables**

*A logic of hierarchy* is based on a managerial relationship of domination and subordination (Ongario 2010). The behaviour of incumbents is the result of hierarchical imposition by organisational leaders. This logic also departs from an instrumental idea that sees administrative systems as instruments which may be utilised to reduce uncertainty and elucidate organisational goals (Egeberg 2003). The behaviour of civil servants may be designed and re-designed and bureaucratic staff is forged by a leadership with organisational capacities and will to direct the behaviour of its subordinates. The overall *rationale for bureaucratic life* echoes public management dogma and doctrines for public sector organisations emphasising the instrumental value of institutions in producing public goods (Christensen and Lægreid 2002). According to this logic of hierarchy, the justifications for bureaucratic behaviour are vested in an idea that public sector organisations are instruments in the pursuit of political goals and that the accountability of bureaucratic organisations is vertical vis-à-vis the bureaucratic centre.

A *portfolio logic*, by contrast, suggests that bureaucratic organisations are guided by administrative rules and routines codified in their assigned portfolios. A portfolio logic predicts officials to be guided by sub-unit agendas and being ‘intelligent, generalist professionals who advise ministers’ (Richards and Smith 2004: 779). Officials demonstrating a portfolio logic tend to evoke an inward-looking behavioural pattern geared towards their ‘own’ sub-units and task environments. Officials are expected to evoke the classical Weberian civil-servant virtues of being party-politically neutral, attaching identity towards their unit, division and portfolio, and abiding by administrative rules and proper procedures. Their role perceptions and loyalties are expected to be primarily directed towards their bureaucracy, portfolio, and/or sub-unit.

This study measures these behavioural logics at the actor level – that is, how behaviour and roles are *perceived* by the civil servants themselves. Admittedly, there are no guarantees that the perceptions of civil servants always materialise in actors’ behaviour and organisational decisions. However, perceptions serve as frames for action, rendering it more likely than not that particular decision-making dynamics are associated with certain perceptual patterns (Aberbach et al. 1981: 86). Table 1 summarises the proxies applied.

Table 1 Proxies of two behavioural logics

<i>Proxies:</i>	<i>A logic of hierarchy</i>	<i>A logic of portfolio</i>
Loyalties	- Loyalty to the ‘mission and vision’ of the bureaucracy as a whole	- Loyalty towards organisational sub-units and/or portfolio
Preferences	- Preferences for ‘the common good’	- Guided by sub-unit preferences and concerns
Contact and co-ordination patterns	- Vertical patterns of contact and co-ordination towards the bureaucratic leadership	- Horizontal patterns of contact and co-ordination within organisational sub-units and among compatible portfolios
Patterns of co-operation and conflict	- Vertical patterns of co-operation and conflict between leaders and subordinated officials	- Horizontal patterns of co-operation and conflict among compatible organisational sub-units and portfolios

## Independent variables

Previous studies have attributed Commission governance to characteristics of the personnel (Stevens and Stevens 2001), recruitment procedures (Page 1997), ideological background of the personnel (Hooghe 2010), and socialisation dynamics (Trondal 2007). This article emphasises two organisational variables that have demonstrated significance in recent public administration literature (Egeberg and Trondal 2009): (i) The accumulation of relevant organisational capacities at the bureaucratic centre, and (ii) the vertical and horizontal specialisation of the Commission administration.

Formal organisations offer codified and normative structures that enable and limit the room of manoeuvre that incumbents think they have. In order to understand the process whereby actors adopt particular behaviour, roles, preferences and patterns of co-operation and conflict one has to unpack the normative structures embedded in these organisational principles and the logic of action underneath. The mechanism supporting an organisational approach is the bounded rationality and computational limitations of actors (Simon 1957). Formal organisations provide cognitive and normative shortcuts and categories that simplify and guide actors' choice of behaviour and roles (Simon 1957). Organisations provide cognitive maps that categorise complex information, offer procedures for reducing transaction costs, and give regulative norms that add cues for appropriate behaviour as well as physical boundaries and temporal rhythms that guide actors' perceptions of relevance with respect to behaviour and role (Barnett and Finnemore 1999; March and Olsen 1998). Organisations also discriminate between what conflicts that should be attended to and what conflicts that should be de-emphasised (Egeberg 2006). By organising civil servants into permanent bureaucracies, a system of 'rule followers and role players [...]' is established relatively independently of the domestic branch of executive government (March and Olsen 1998: 952). From the abovementioned organisational variables we may derive the following four hypotheses - thus assuming a two-by-two matrix of possible empirical predictions:

***H1** Behavioural logics are likely to vary systematically according to the vertical specialisation of executive institutions. The vertical specialisation of the Commission administration is assumed positively associated with a behavioural logic of hierarchy among Commission officials.*

***H2** Behavioural logics are likely to vary systematically according to the horizontal specialisation of the Commission administration. Horizontal specialisation of the Commission administration is assumed positively associated with a behavioural logic of portfolio.*



**H3** *The accumulation of relevant organisational capacities at the executive centre of the Commission (within the SG) is assumed positively associated with a behavioural logic of hierarchy among Commission officials.*

**H4** *A corresponding lack of relevant organisational capacities at the executive centre of the Commission is assumed negatively associated with a behavioural logic of hierarchy among Commission officials.*

The above hypotheses suggest that the behavioural logics of Commission officials are profoundly mediated by the formal structure of the Commission administration – that is, the *vertical* specialisation of hierarchy, the *horizontal* specialisation of DGs and sub-units, and the degree of organisational capacity at the executive centre (strong vs. weak).

**H1:** One proxy of the vertical specialisation of bureaucratic organisation is the formal rank of personnel. Officials within different formal ranks are likely to employ different behaviour and role perceptions. Arguably, officials in top rank positions are more likely to evoke a logic of hierarchy than are officials in bottom rank positions. The latter group is more likely to identify with organisational sub-units and employ a behavioural logic of portfolio (Mayntz 1999: 84).

**H2:** The horizontal specialisation of organisations is assumed to mobilise a behavioural logic of portfolio among incumbents. Department and unit structures are typically specialised according to two conventional principles: purpose and process (Gulick 1937). Formal organisations may be specialised by the major *purpose* served – such as research, health, food safety, etc. This principle of organisation tends to activate patterns of co-operation and conflict among incumbents along sectoral cleavages (Egeberg 2006). Arguably, organisation by major purpose served is likely to mobilise a sectoral behavioural logic of portfolio. This behavioural mode may result in less than adequate horizontal co-ordination *across* organisational units and better co-ordination *within* organisational units (Ansell 2004: 237; Page 1997: 10). The Commission DG and unit structure is a prominent example of this horizontal principle of specialisation (Egeberg and Trondal 1999). The Commission is a horizontally pillarised system of government specialised by purpose where DGs enjoy relative autonomy vis-à-vis other sub-units and the bureaucratic centre (the SG). Because officials spend most of their time and energy in organisational sub-units, they are expected to make affective ties primarily towards their sub-unit and less towards the organisation as a whole (Ashford and Johnson 2001: 36). Subsequently, Commission civil servants in DG Trade, as studied here, are likely to activate behavioural logics that reflect their

affiliations towards sub-units and divisions to a larger extent than towards the Commission as a whole.

A second principle of horizontal specialisation present within most bureaucratic organisations is the principle of the major *process* utilised – such as translation, general secretariat, administration, legal services, personnel services, etc. (Gulick 1937). This horizontal principle encourages the horizontal integration of functional departments and the disintegration of the major purposes served. General secretariats typically have horizontal tasks of co-ordinating the work of the whole bureaucracy as well as vertically integrating the administrative and political levels of the bureaucracy. These organisational functions are likely to foster inter-sectoral portfolio behaviour among incumbents because their portfolios cover larger terrains of the bureaucracy. Within the Commission the internal services such as the SG illustrate the process principle. The SG aims at integrating the policy DGs into one coherent political secretariat for the College. Concomitantly, officials in the SG are expected to develop inter-DG preferences, roles and loyalties by activating a ‘helicopter view’ of the whole Commission.

**H3 and H4:** The degree of organisational capacity at the executive centre of bureaucratic organisation (strong vs. weak) is assumed to affect the degree to which officials will assume a behavioural logic of hierarchy. It is argued here that the accumulation of relevant organisational capacities at the executive centre may strengthen the potential for the bureaucratic centre to penetrate bureaucratic sub-units. Reflecting the vertical specialisation of bureaucratic organisations, studies demonstrate that agency officials exercise their discretion relatively insulated from on-going political processes at the cabinet level (Egeberg 2003; Greer 1994; Wood and Waterman 1991). Agency officials tend to have relatively little contact with the political leadership of their respective ministries, with other ministerial departments than their parent department, and with parliament. Most typically they tend to give priority to professional considerations rather than political concerns. In ministerial departments, on the other hand, top priority is given to signals from the minister but also to professional concerns. This loss of political control over organisational sub-units subordinated to the ministry can be partly compensated for by strengthening relevant organizational units in the respective ministerial departments (Egeberg and Trondal 2009).

Bureaucratic organisations with strong organisational capacities at the centre have the potential for *disciplining and controlling* civil servants by administrative command and individual incentive systems like salary, promotion, and rotation (Egeberg 2003). There are a few key mechanisms through which the Commission may co-ordinate the services from the centre:

Most notable is through the principle of collegiality by the College of Commissioners and the co-ordinating role of the SG. These mechanisms may be supplemented by the weekly meetings of Director-Generals, chefs de cabinets, and deputy chefs de cabinets (Christiansen 2008: 75-6). In addition, the Commission has introduced new management techniques, including a more linear career structure, promotion linked to merit, and obligatory mobility among the staff. In short, the Commission has accumulated increased organisational leverage to impose a logic of hierarchy on the staff (Bennett and Oliver 2002: 425; Egeberg 2003: 137; Knight 1970). In effect, the Commission administration is expected to make officials more sensitive to a steer from above (a behavioural logic of hierarchy).

## Data and methods

The empirical observations benefit from a new body (N=74) of data on permanent and temporary officials in the Commission. First, semi-structured interviews have been completed among Commission Administrators (N=24) by using a standardised interview guide. The questions posed in the interviews were directed at measuring the *perceptions* of civil servants with respect to the logics of hierarchy and portfolio. A similar interview guide was applied on temporary officials in the Commission (see below). Proxies applied were: officials' contact patterns, co-ordination behaviour, patterns of conflict and co-operation, and role and identity perceptions.

In order to maximise variation on the abovementioned independent variables interviewees were selected accordingly. First, two administrative sub-units were selected to measure the effect of horizontal specialisation of the Commission. DG Trade was selected as a horizontally *purpose* organised DG. The SG was chosen as a horizontal DG which is specialised according to the principle of *process*. These cases, however, also offer variation as regards vertical specialisation of the Commission, where the SG represents the bureaucratic centre of the Commission and DG Trade represents one among several Commission policy DGs. Moreover, to further measure the effect of hierarchy interviewees were carefully selected from different levels of rank. However, only officials at the level equivalent to the 'A-level' were interviewed. One caveat is warranted: The data presented covers two Commission DGs and a fairly small sample compared to the universe of Administrators (ADs). Concomitantly, the selected cases merely serve as *illustrative devices* to illuminate relationships between bureaucratic centre formation and behavioural patterns among Commission officials.

The timing of interviews should aim at balancing between not being conducted too early – before reform effects materialises – and not too late – when reform effects are forgotten by respondents. Interviews were carried out during 2006 and 2007. Our timing of interviews aimed at maximising the potential for observing effects of administrative reforms in the Commission (four years after the reforms were initially launched). Essentially, however, this article does not provide a systematic account of the Kinnock reform.

All interviewees are treated with full anonymity. Quotations from interviews are referred to as Commission 2, etc. In addition to interviews with permanent officials, interviews with temporary Commission officials (seconded national experts (SNEs)) are also included in this analysis (N=50). SNEs are used in this study as a ‘hard’ test of the four hypotheses outlined above. Due to SNE’s ambiguous and short affiliation towards the Commission administration it is less likely that their behavioural logics are profoundly mediated by the formal structure of the Commission administration. Essentially, it is *less likely* that SNEs adopt the behavioural logics of hierarchy and portfolio than permanent Commission officials. Essentially, SNEs represent a critical case in these regards. This study benefits from three data sets on Commission SNEs. The first study consists of Nordic SNEs (see Trondal 2006 for a presentation of the original data). Based on similar methodology, this study was replicated twice on SNEs from The Netherlands (see Trondal et al. 2008 for a presentation of the original data). This replication applied the same interview guide as in the first study. In summary, these data include three in-depth qualitative interview studies on SNEs. Despite covering only a minor selection of Commission SNEs, the organisational approach outlined above does not predict significant variation in behavioural logics between officials of different national origins.

## **Bureaucratic centre formation in the Commission – observations on Commission officials**

The following section illuminated the two core behavioural logics among Commission officials.

### **A behavioural logic of hierarchy among Commission officials**

Bureaucratic centre formation has been demonstrated within the Commission at several points throughout its history – notably during the Jean Monnet and Jacques Delors presidencies. ‘At the end of Delors’ ten-year tenure at the helm of the Commission its potential for political leadership [...] had been demonstrated conclusively’ (Christiansen 2008: 63). Essentially, however, the

power-base of these presidents and their policy initiatives were often not safeguarded through bureaucratic capacity building within the Commission. A relative downgrading of bureaucratic organisation was also observed throughout the Monnet Presidency decades earlier. Jean Monnet had the vision of great leadership from the top of the EU executive, with assistance of a small and flexible expert administration consisting of SNEs. Jean Monnet did not envision a permanent bureaucracy as inherent in Western democracies. It was Walter Hallstein – Commission president 1958-67 – who designed the Commission into a bureaucratic organisation (Loth and Bitsch 2007: 58). Most of the powers, however, were left to the policy DGs and fairly little to the command centre of the College and the SG. This section demonstrates that the Commission administration has recently experienced substantial capacity building around the President and the SG.

At present, two organisational changes in the Commission administration have strengthened the capacity for bureaucratic centre formation: the strengthening of organisational capacities at the helm of the Commission and the entry of management reform techniques. First, one of the most salient issues in the Commission is the ambition to make the SG into the administrative command centre for the President. This has two ingredients to it: First, increased steering and co-ordination *ambitions*, and secondly a concentration of *power resources* around the President.

As regards the former, *ambitions* to strengthen central steering capacity in the Commission are documented by all our interviewees in the SG and by President Barroso himself (2009: 37). As regard the *de facto* concentration of power resources around the President, the power base of previous Commission Presidents such as Monnet and Delors was largely based on their *personal* capacities, convictions, successes, and a dedicated inner circle of director-generals, cabinet members, and Commissioners (Duchêne 1994; Ross 1995). Delors also used deadlines – realistic ones – to set the pace of the administration and built task forces lead by the SG for pursuing them. These efforts, however, did not accompany lasting organisational effects in the Commission because of the limited time horizons for the task forces. Our key argument is that current centre formation in the Commission is centred on building organisational capacities around the President, partly by reforming the SG into an administrative service centre at the disposal for the President. The SG has been considered the power-house of the Commission throughout the Commission history, largely due to the *man* who held the post as Secretary-General from 1958 to 1987, Emile Noël (see Kassim 2006). By contrast, the Barroso I Commission is associated with organisational capacity building inside the Commission. In contrast to Monnet and Delors, organisational centre formation around Barroso is thus likely to entail more

enduring organisational implications as regards centre formation (see March 2010: 112). Contemporary organisational capacity building within the SG has enhanced the potential for a behavioural logic of hierarchy to penetrate policy DGs. As a consequence, President Barroso reports being 'determined to provide "political guidance" to the institution. He is more directly involved and takes responsibility for a large number of dossiers' (Kurpas et al. 2008: 32). Comparing the number of proposals prepared under the direct responsibility of Presidents Prodi and Barroso, Kurpas et al. (2008: 33) report that President Barroso has been overwhelmingly more active. Essential to our argument, this activism is associated with organisational capacity building at the centre of the Commission administration.

The Lisbon setting is where the President has tried to overcome the turf fighting between the DGs and to create first of all a better link between DGs concerned, but also tried to implement a more presidential style of Commission policy making in giving a lot of tasks and responsibilities to the Secretariat General.

*Q: Has he succeeded in that respect?*

Yes and no. But the problem is that it is a new process. That is a difficult balance to strike because we have to change our way of working away from the collegiality of all 27 Commissioners to a more presidential style. They need to strengthen the Secretariat General. They try. Partly they do well, but it certainly is not settled yet.

*Q: One point is to reduce 'silo thinking'. Has it been reduced?*

I think it has been reduced. (Commission 23)

Bureaucratic centre formation in the Commission administration merely supplements the horizontal specialisation and 'siloisation' of the services. As seen above, the 'siloisation' of the services is increasingly echoed in the College where Commissioners have become less collegial and more portfolio oriented over time (Joana and Smith 2004; Kurpas et al. 2008). The non-portfolio dynamic observed in previous studies thus seem increasingly weakened in the College (Joana and Smith 2004). This is reflected in College meetings, in the relationship between the Commissioners and their DGs, and the development of direct links between Commissioners and 'their' EU agencies (Groenleer 2009: 130). Also, the vast majority of our SG interviewees report that the SG is an emergent bureaucratic power base of the President.

Secondly, following the resignation of the Santer Commission, the Commission has undergone the most extensive *management reforms* since its inception. Partly inspired by New Public Management (NPM) ideas, the goal has been to 'create a modern and efficient public administration based on the principles of efficiency, transparency and accountability' and on principles of 'good governance' supplemented by 'Weberian-bureaucratic' ideas (Ellinas and Suleiman 2009; Wille 2007: 37). The management reforms have been described as the most far-reaching reforms of the Commission administration since the erection of the High Authority in 1952 (Kassim 2009) and the merger reforms in 1967 (Schön-Quinlivan 2006: 15). However, as early as 1979 the Spierenburg report made a diagnosis and a call for reform due to a 'lack of cohesion within the College, an imbalance between Commissioners' portfolios, worrisome organizational fragmentation at College and administrative levels, an inefficient distribution of staff compared with responsibilities, and a problematic career structure' (Bauer 2007: 56). Many of the same organisational diagnoses were identified more than 20 years later by the Santer, Prodi, and Barroso Commissions (Bauer 2007). Consequently, management reforms have been called for throughout Commission history. One standard answer to these calls seems to be a reassertion of the bureaucratic centre of the Commission.

The Secretariat General remains the guarantor of collegiality, at the service of the President. I consider that the biggest challenge for the SG today is that of policy integration, bringing together different policy strands at the earliest possible stage of preparation to ensure that when proposals arrive at the College for decision they are coherent with the overall policy goals. (O'Sullivan 2006: 101)

Central to the ambition of reasserting the centre of the Commission has been installing obligatory mobility among the staff. As commented on by most of our interviewees, a key element in the reform package has been the creation of a new appraisal system – the Career Development Reviews (CDR). 'Officials can now accumulate their points and are promoted when they reach a certain threshold' (Knill and Balint 2009: 48). This reform has not only contributed to NPM-related measures but has also clearly seen an expanded body of control and verification procedures (e.g. Bauer and Knill 2007; Kassim 2004 and 2009). Our interviewees argue that the CDR has accompanied a bureaucratisation of the services (see also Ellinas and Suleiman 2008). When asked about the current Commission machinery, one of our interviewees replies:

'With the after-effects of the Santer Commission, I think, the whole Commission, including this DG, has become more process oriented, more procedural; some would say more bureaucratic, more

cumbersome. The amount of resources that are now being used internally for purely administrative tasks has grown as a result of the various reforms that have been introduced. I think the scope for [informal processes] has become much less. The procedures have become more formalised.’ (Commission 9)

With the Kinnock Reform things have become a bit more formal. You have much more formal planning now, much more benchmarking, indication of objectives and testing the results with the objectives – that has become more formal. (Commission 24)

Essential for our argument, however, most of our interviewees think that the CDR system has had *modest impact* on their actual decision-making behaviour.<sup>ii</sup> This primarily reflect the fact that the organisational architecture of the Commission administration remains largely untouched by the Kinnock reforms. Despite profound management reforms, our data suggests that the logic of hierarchy remain largely unaffected by the Kinnock reforms. As predicted (H1), contact and co-ordination behaviour among Commission officials are mainly patterned by the vertical hierarchy of the individual DGs (ex. DG Trade) and only *marginally* affected by the administrative capacity building at the bureaucratic centre of the Commission (the SG). This observation is *not* compatible with bureaucratic centre formation.

Q: *Who is most important to you?*

In my everyday life and everyday work it is the Head of Unit. The hierarchy here in the Commission is a very French one. It is very vertical. I felt that already in DG Competition. And you have to be very careful about how to pass on messages, and please don’t bypass anybody because they will feel maybe a little bit frustrated or ignored.’ (Commission 19)

Another way of measuring the impact of the hierarchy (H1) is to ask whether rotation/turn-over among directors profoundly affect officials’ everyday life at office. Most interviewees confirm that rotation/turn-over of heads of unit, directors, directors-general and even Commissioners have significantly impacted on their decision-making behaviour. This, however, reflects the effect of intra-DG hierarchies and is *not* compatible with bureaucratic centre formation, as conceived here. As predicted by H2, Commission officials attach most of their energy and attention towards sub-units inside DGs. Similarly, recent research suggests that the informal networks among Commission officials are clustered within DGs (Suvarierol 2007: 118). Our observations in DG Trade show that officials are clearly guided by the hierarchy *inside* DGs and not primarily by the SG. Inside one’s own DG, interviewees claim that



desk officials may have contact directly up to the director level or even to the director-general level – largely bypassing more than one hierarchical level. Often, such direct contact up the hierarchical ladder is caused by the ‘hierarchical lifting’ of the officials’ files (interviews). Such hierarchical lifting may be caused by a politicisation of particular dossiers as well as the policy interests among directors and directors-general. Reflecting intra-DG hierarchies, however, this observation is *not* compatible with bureaucratic centre formation.

‘We are still very hierarchical. All official notes and signatures go through me. People have contacts with the Director, but this very much depends on the personality of the Directors.’ (Commission 1)

### **A behavioural logic of portfolio among Commission officials**

Reflecting the horizontal specialisation of the Commission administration, predicted variation is observed between permanent ADs in the SG and DG Trade officials as regards the logic of portfolio (H2). Whereas most officials in the SG agree that they adopt an inter-sectoral portfolio logic – or what interviewees term a ‘helicopter view’ of the Commission’s work –, officials in DG Trade mostly emphasise a sectoral portfolio logic – or ‘silo thinking’ as phrased by our interviewees. This variation in the portfolio logic reflects variation in the horizontal specialisation of DGs – where the SG is a *process organised* DG and DG Trade is a *purpose organised* DG (H2).

Moreover, bureaucratic centre *ambitions* inside the SG sometimes exceed their centre *capacities*. The horizontal interlocking role of the SG tends to collide with the horizontal specialisation of policy DGs (H2). One SG official makes this point:

There is tremendous power in the departments because of what they know about their policy areas, and their decades of managing and developing policy. There is a large level of experience and knowledge of their areas. And we are inevitably skating on the surface. The most likely role that we will play is to sit down at the table together and squeeze them all to give a bit of ground that they already know. So the departments are very strong. But they can be pulled, of course, into a compromise by each other as much as by us. Proposals from other DGs are far more frequently adjusted and adapted by us rather than blocked or fundamentally changed. We delay people. We tell them their file is not ready because there has to be further discussion, further preparation. They want to run it straight up, get it up for a decision. And we won’t necessarily let that happen. (Commission 4)

DG Trade officials confirm the ambitions of the SG to co-ordinate the Commission services. However, officials in DG Trade report focusing primarily on *intra*-DG co-ordination (H2). One effect of the horizontal specialisation of the services is the emergence of an individualisation of policy formulation within separate DGs.

Even the President says we are thinking in silos and we have a lot of turf fighting. That is, I think, well known and even acknowledged by the President. Barroso says we should now stop with this silo thinking and start working together. (Commission 7)

As predicted (H2), bureaucratic centre formation in the Commission seems largely dashed by the horizontal specialisation of the DGs. 'Silo thinking' is organisationally vested within the Commission services. The stronghold of the silo logic is reported by the following official: 'Don't come close to our territory. We deal with taxation, you don't!' (Commission 22). The contact patterns among DG Trade officials are strongly driven by their portfolios. A recent study also confirms that informal networks inside the Commission are indeed guided by the horizontal specialisation of the services, and largely clustered within DGs (Suvarierol 2007: 118). Moreover, patterns of co-operation and conflict inside the Commission are largely associated with the horizontal specialisation of the services (H2) (interviews). The following quote illustrates the organisational dimension of co-operation and conflict:

Generally, I think there is a lot of conflict really, between our Director and other directorates. I can think of a couple of cases where my Director has conflict with another director, and that affects my relationship with my counterpart in that unit. (Commission 22)

As predicted (H2), the horizontally specialised DG structure also profoundly activates perceptions of portfolio role and identity among the staff. Moreover, this effect is largely sustained and strengthened by the compulsory staff rotation system. The vast majority of our interviewees reports that their Commission identity is mainly directed towards the DGs and only secondary towards the unit level and the Commission as a whole. Whereas previous research underlines the importance of loyalty towards the Commission as a whole (Suvarierol 2007: 122), our data demonstrates sub-unit *DG loyalties*, identities and roles. One explanation is that the personnel rotation system accompanies fairly short tenure for most officials at the unit level and complementary longer tenures within the DGs as wholes.

I don't identify just with the unit, because I have been here three years and I have done so many other units before. So for me it is one step up in the DG. I have done so many things in this DG, so my identification with the DG is stronger. (Commission 8)

I would say [I attach more identification towards] the DG than the Commission. I feel an attachment to the DG Trade, rather than to the Commission as a whole. It is a certain team spirit – the DG Trade – a hard working DG. (Commission 16)

There is an *esprit de corps* at the level of the Directorate. I think it is the culture of this work that is already here. It is something that you cannot see, but you have it there. And it has been probably introduced years ago in order to ensure that the 25 different nationalities end up producing the same thing, irrespective of the fact that I am Greek and somebody else is German or French. (Commission 24 – emphasis added)

Next, re-engineering a large Commission administration is not done overnight. Despite ambitious policies to modernise and reform the Commission during the last decade, our data suggests that the results are modest as regards transforming the behavioural logics of Commission ADs. This is largely due to the fact that the organisational architecture of the Commission remains intact after the Kinnock reforms (H1 and H2). Moreover, by 2008 the pressure to reform the Commission apparatus has largely vanished from the office of the President of the Commission. One reason may be that middle and top Commission officials have given an overly negative assessment of the Kinnock reforms as regards the amount of red tape and formalism (Bauer 2009: 72). Our interviewees largely support these attitudes towards the Commission reforms. The reforms are perceived by interviewees as contributing to increased control and bureaucratisation. Our interviewees also demonstrate that attitudes towards the CDR system vary systematically by the rank of Commission officials (H1) (see also Ellinas and Suleiman 2009). The annual reviews of the performance of the officials are managed by the heads of unit but are partly controlled by the directors. They are considered time-consuming and costly, but also a vehicle for mutual information between officials and the leadership (see also Wille 2007: 46). Interviewees report that the Kinnock reforms have affected the attention, time, and attitudes towards reform, as well as the general 'atmosphere' at work. Most officials report that the system has accompanied increased conflicts and frustration, however, a recent study suggests that officials' attitudes have become less reform aversive over time (Bauer 2010). Essential for our argument, however, the vast majority of interviewees report that despite fierce attitudes towards the reforms, increased workload, and increased formalism and red-tape, the Kinnock

reform has *not* caused profound transformation of how Commission officials work.

It hasn't affected my work at all. I've noticed that it has affected the atmosphere between the colleagues when it comes to the time of the year when we get our marks [...] (Commission 5).

It can affect the moral, and the moral can of course indirectly affect the work, but I have never witnessed a colleague changing his work performance and habit because or thanks to the CDR, probably because there are other reasons – hopefully – than just the CDR for working in the Commission.

*Q: Does it have any effect at all?*

I would say no, because if you actually look at the functioning of the system, even somebody who is not a high performer would get the promotion, maybe a year later (Commission 12).

[...]if you ask an official here during the year “What are your five career objectives?” I doubt you'll find people who can remember. So the CDR has not steered people's behaviour, for the worse or the better (Commission 11).

The Kinnock reforms ... had implications on everybody, but not on the work, but on the way we are paid and promoted (Commission 7).

The way you are evaluated [...] that for me has no effect on the way I work for a file. CDR is the process to be evaluated, but I cannot find any link if you like with the need to work or my quality of work (Commission 12).

Notwithstanding having negative attitudes on the majority of the reform ingredients, the behavioural logics among Commission officials seem to remain largely unaffected. Despite increased attention devoted to Commission reform, and despite the ambition of creating a flexible and rotating pool of Commission officials, the power vested in the services still distribute power and attention inside the Commission administration (H2). Hence, the great hopes from Kinnock are often dashed within the services. According to one official:

The Commission is yet to be really flexible in re-allocating people to new priorities. Posts are fixed within a unit, within a directorate. No Director will give up his post. I mean, it is a question of power. (Commission 22)

The turf-fights accompanied by the CDR as regards the allocation of merit and priority points in the Commission seem largely to sustain the inherent portfolio logic rather than to transform it, particularly among directors:

I think the CDR causes stresses amongst certain colleagues, because it creates rivalry. It ends up with directors fighting for points for their own directorates, against each other (Commission 9).

Finally, an additional illustration of the power of the Commission organisation is the extent to which seconded national experts (SNEs) tend to adopt portfolio roles and identities. Being hired by the Commission for a maximum of four years and having an ambiguous organisational affiliation to the Commission during the contract period, the emergence of portfolio roles and identity perceptions among SNEs would serve as a valuable test of this power. Our data suggests that SNEs tend to be attached to the Commission organisation quite quickly upon arrival in Brussels, viewing themselves as 'ordinary' Commission officials. Interviews both with *current* and *former* SNEs demonstrate that these officials direct their *primary* allegiances towards Commission DGs and sub-units and only secondary allegiances towards their parent ministries and agencies back home (see Trondal et al. 2008). Quite similar to permanent officials, portfolio loyalties among SNEs reflect the horizontal specialisation of the Commission services (H2).

[...] [a]s a secondee you always have a complicated dual position. But I for one, and the people that I know, found a good middle course between on the one hand loyalty to the Commission and on the other hand loyalty to their home country. (Commission 19)

Two other SNEs claim that:

[a]s a secondee you are loyal to the Commission. But one's salary is paid by the Netherlands. I had no problems functioning in that dual position. (Commission 24)

It's probably more about the difference between DG Fish and DG Trade than it is about the difference between being seconded and not being seconded. (Commission 22)

## Conclusions

Reflecting the Neo-Weberian model outlined by Ongario (2010), this article has suggested that the Commission administration features a particular combination of two generic behavioural logics: a logic of hierarchy and a logic of portfolio. These logics highlight competing understandings of bureaucratic organisation, administrative behaviour, bureaucratic change, and the potential and limits of public sector governance. Empirically it is often observed that executive centre formation does not result in integrated and coherent executive orders consisting of perfectly-integrated and monolithic institutions. Executive centres do not typically 'hang together', exhibiting coherence and predictability. Instead, different components of executive centres are observed to overlap, counteract, layer and sometimes be out of synch rather than being integrated, co-ordinated and 'ordered' (Orren and Skowronek 2004). Bureaucratic organisations - such as the Commission - are typically characterised by the co-existence of multiple and co-evolving decision-making and accountability dynamics. Behavioural dynamics among actors are seen to co-exist but the mix tends to change over time as well as between different institutional contexts (Olsen 2010).

This study has made two key observations: First, bureaucratic centre formation inside the Commission is primarily observed in the SG and only marginally inside DG Trade. Bureaucratic centre formation inside the Commission does not profoundly penetrate the services. The portfolio logic serves as the foundational dynamic at the heart of DG Trade and it seems to be activated fairly independently of processes of bureaucratic centre formation at the helm of the Commission - within the SG. A previous study of top Commission officials also supports this finding, reporting that the Commission is caught between a call for managerialism and upholding Weberian bureaucratic principles (Ellinas and Suleiman 2009: 83). Secondly, variation in bureaucratic centre formation in the Commission administration is associated with two key variables: (i) the accumulation of relevant organisational capacities at the bureaucratic centre (H3 and H4), and (ii) the vertical and horizontal specialisation of the Commission administration (H1 and H2). Moreover, these findings hold when comparing permanent and temporary Commission officials and when 'controlling for' recent managerial reforms inside the Commission. First, notwithstanding temporary officials' ambiguous and short affiliation towards the Commission administration this study shows that their behavioural logics are profoundly mediated by the formal structure of the Commission administration - similar to permanent Commission officials. Secondly, this study has demonstrated that some core behavioural logics inside government institutions such as the Commission are *not* profoundly transformed by large-scale administrative reforms.

This study also documents behavioural patterns that are compatible with bureaucratic centre formation inside the Commission. These observations, however, are primarily found among officials at the bureaucratic centre of the Commission – within the SG. The inherent portfolio logic among officials in policy DGs – such as DG Trade – seems only marginally affected by the presidential ambitions of Barroso as well as the increased administrative capacities of the SG. This study thus suggests that re-engineering bureaucratic organisations – such as the Commission administration – is not done overnight. Despite ambitious policies to modernise and reform the Commission during the last decade, this study suggests that the results are modest as regards transforming some core behavioural logics of Commission officials. These findings resonate with studies suggesting that reforms of government institutions are not always effectively accompanied by a subsequent change of decision-making practices (Olsen 2010). Bureaucratic centre formation inside the Commission is a fairly recent phenomenon and this study suggests that Commission officials remain primarily guided by an unreconstructed Commission bureaucratic architecture. Bureaucratic centre formation – as in the Commission – tend to be profoundly mediated by pre-existing politico-administrative orders – by the ‘genetic soup’ of pre-existing organisational structures (Olsen 2010: 96).

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Another supplementary argument that has been suggested is that there are often 'very weak ties between any specific behavior and the actual reward', and that the actual threshold that officials have to meet in order to be promoted are shifting, ambiguous, and often set after the appraisal process (Ban 2008: 7).



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