

Adrian Campbell
Doctor of Science,
Senior Lecturer, University of Birmingham,
International Development Department,
School of Government and Society,
Birmingham, UK
a.campbell@bham.ac.uk

IN PRAISE OF TECHNOCRACY...?

It was the Moscow Urban Forum of 2011 and one of the speakers, a prominent reformer, was explaining how Moscow's problem was that it lacked a brand. It was an odd statement, as few cities are more recognisable or symbolically laden than Moscow. One of the audience, a former mayor of Milan commented: "*and that...is the difference between a politician and a technocrat*".

Who is a technocrat? There are two basic definitions. The first, more positive, is that a technocrat is '*a member of a skilled, technical elite*' [1]. The second, more negative definition is that a technocrat is a '*politician or senior official who values technical and economic data over human factors*' [2].

This implied mutual opposition of technical and human factors, is supported in the academic literature by Grindle's [3] characterisation of the technocrat as apolitical, influential in policymaking, concerned with rationality and efficiency and underestimating the need to consider questions of human relations and politics. The technocrat is therefore a figure who combines power and neutrality, whose separateness from (and perhaps ignorance of) the local political context may be seen as a strength rather than a weakness. In this respect, the mayor in the example above was correct in drawing a distinction between politicians and technocrats – the latter do not have, or do not need, the skills, cultural empathy or democratic legitimacy of the former.

However, this is not just a case of a gap between theory and practice, as the technocrat is a practitioner and may hold high political office. In this respect the rise of technocracy follows a longstanding trend – identified by Hobbes, according to Habermas [4] - whereby the advance of science and technology breaks down the

traditional divide between theory and (political/moral) practice, making politics supposedly obsolete.

According to Putnam's landmark study [5] the technocratic mentality consisted of five components:

Confidence that social problems can be solved by scientific or technological means. Scepticism or hostility toward politicians and political institutions. Little sympathy for the openness and equality of democracy. A preference for pragmatic over ideological or moral assessments of policy alternatives. Strong commitment to technological progress in the form of material productivity, without concern for questions of distributive or social justice.

The third point here, regarding pragmatism, suggests an overlap with a certain kind of politician. Not all politicians are preoccupied in practice with the democratic principles on which their legitimacy ultimately rests, but rather with maintaining a political career, professional politicians who, in Weberian terms live from politics rather than for politics [6].

Similarly, it is important to distinguish technocrats from technicians (those who merely provide analysis or advice but are not involved in decision-making) and from bureaucrats (who administer but do not, as a rule, initiate, policy) – indeed technocrats tend to regard bureaucrats as an obstacle to reform and seek to reduce their power [7].

Drawing on the ideas of Habermas, Centeno observes that “the technocratic model of objective necessity replaces the decisionistic model of politics, which leads to a ‘scientification of politics’ and inevitably produces an authoritarian political framework” [8].

While technocracy may be an easy target for criticism, it may be more symptom than cause. In the same year as the example above, 2011, technocratic rule was expanding in Europe, as apolitical technocrats were appointed as heads of government in Italy and Greece in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008 and its repercussions within the Eurozone. By 2013 a reaction against technocratic government was gathering momentum among commentators in Europe. Some even

drew a parallel between what had happened with Russian privatisation in the 1990s (a theoretically correct approach diverted from its stated aims by political realities) and the limitations of technocratic reforms in the Eurozone [9].

The informed challenge to technocracy has typically been based on an assumed opposition between politics and technocracy in which politics is seen as pragmatism, the art of the possible, whereas technocracy might be seen as the science of the impossible, rational but not practical.

However, this does not, of course, exhaust the possibilities of the debate, as the context of political activity has, in the years since 2008, itself undergone a transformation, with the emergence of populism as a counter to traditional party-based politics. As early as 2010, Canadian commentator and politician Chrystia Freeland was arguing that the struggle between technocracy and populism had replaced that of Left and Right [10]. The implication was that struggles between conventional politics and populism within Right of Left are now more important than between Left and Right. This is complicated further.

References

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