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'Paying the price': Impact on subordinate potential and expectations in the new bureaucracy

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It is argued that many types of bureaucratic reform have entailed an extension or intensification of, not a departure from, bureaucratic control. This paper reports the findings of a qualitative case study which examines the impact of 'new bureaucratic' structures and systems on the performance and expectations of organisational subordinates. Such subordinates question the 'price' that has to be paid by themselves to achieve strategic visions devised and implemented by remote and faceless senior executives. This price is reflected in subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which 'cleaned-up' bureaucratic processes impact on the achievement of their overall potential. Subordinates place emphasis on their immediate managers to act as a shield to protect them from the more extreme measures devised by senior executives. Such shielding strategies were found to comprise elements of directly 'supporting' subordinates as well as 'softening' the more negative aspects of the organisational environment.

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Key words: cleaned-up bureaucracy; organisational change; subordinate expectations

This paper reports the findings of a qualitative case study which examines the impact of 'new bureaucratic' structures and systems on the performance and expectations of organisational subordinates. Critical studies of recent attempts to restructure bureaucracies (Cornfield, Campbell, & McCammon, 2001; Courpasson, 2000; Hales, 2002; Rees & Rodley, 1995; Stokes & Clegg, 2002; Thompson & Warhurst, 1998) suggest that many types of bureaucratic reform have entailed an extension or intensification of, not a departure from, bureaucratic control (Alvesson, 1995; Hilmer & Donaldson, 1996; Whittington & Mayer, 2000). It is argued that bureaucratic reform often entails changes within the basic bureaucratic model rather than paradigmatic shifts to radically new organizational forms (Hales, 2002). The end result is not a de-bureaucratized organization but a cleaned-up bureaucracy (Heckscher, 1994). Hales (2002: 52) maintains that many bureaucratic reforms retain 'the defining features of bureaucracy – hierarchical control, centrally imposed rules, and individual managerial responsibility and accountability'. The result is an attenuated and more efficient version of bureaucracy – 'bureaucracy-lite' – which possesses 'all the strength of bureaucratic control but with only half of the hierarchical calories' (ibid: 64). The end result is not an alternative to, but an alternative version of, bureaucratic organization. Bureaucracy-lite seeks to 'retain tight control over managers' behaviour through the combination of rules and vertical reporting relationships, while reducing the size and cost of the hierarchy' (ibid: 62).

Subordinates in cleaned-up bureaucracies thus frequently experience greater powerlessness than members of unreconstituted bureaucracies, despite the emphasis in the latter on hierarchical command and control techniques, extensive formalisation, technical narrowness, jurisdictional delimitation, and standardized procedures. It is well known that in Western-style economies, public sector and private sector bureaucracies, in their post-war incarnation, frequently afforded members informal power resources and discretion based on, for example, control of 'areas of uncertainty' (Crozier, 1964: 172), inconsistent or indulgent application of rules (Gouldner, 1964), and unofficial procedural adjustments aimed at avoiding perceived dysfunctional aspects of official procedures (Blau, 1963). The project of cleaning-up a bureaucracy entails removing the organisational and managerial slack that sustains these unofficial practices, further codifying performance expectations and invigilating work, while simultaneously fostering a micro-political centralization within the organization (Courpasson, 2000).

Indeed, the restoration and legitimation of managerial prerogatives under the guise of an allegedly new approach to labour management (Buchanan, 1995) is a prevalent theme in the critical literature. Efforts to clean up bureaucracies provide the opportunity to (re)assert managerial control over how work is performed. Duncan (1995: 167) argues that the era of managerialism or neo-Taylorism is aimed at producing top-down performance control models in which managerialist techniques 'increase rather than decrease bureaucratic control over subordinates while empowering senior managers'. Subordinates lose a degree of both professional autonomy and security of employment conditions (Duncan, 1995; Sennett, 1998). The effects of such changes are felt just as much by middle-to-lower level managers as they are by those in non-managerial positions (Mulholland, 1998; Thomas & Dunkerley, 1999; Thomas & Linstead, 2002). The term 'bright satanic offices' was coined by Baldry, Bain & Taylor (1998: 172) to describe organizations obsessed with performance targets and output measurement, which senior managers use to drive the

process of increasing the volume, speed and intensity of programmed work. The discipline of achieving tight performance criteria is enforced by middle and lower managers who respond to such control by more stringent 'micro-management of their units and subordinates' (Hales, 2002: 61). Surveillance, monitoring and panoptic gaze are utilized to keep subordinates continuously observed and controlled (Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992). Post-bureaucratic initiatives such as quality assurance and total quality management are also regarded by Taylor (1998) as widespread forms of organizational restructuring where management attempts to control and regulate its subordinates.

Other post-bureaucratic initiatives have attempted to introduce the market system into bureaucracies with the intention of fostering entrepreneurial behaviour (Halal, 1994) through such measures as the formation of business units, increased use of subcontractors, and the creation of functional groups that sell their products or services to internal customers. Such internal markets, however, tend to be far from unfettered. They are usually heavily structured by senior management and preserve the essential ingredient of bureaucracy, which is the 'separation of members into sharply discrete parts brought together only at the top' (Heckscher, 1994: 34). Initiatives such as purchaser-provider restructures, and their associated competitive tendering activities, afford senior managers more control over contract employees 'who can easily be sacked or replaced if they question decisions or challenge authority' (Albin, 1995: 141). The rise of a bloated managerial class under a purchaser-provider structure, with the ubiquitous presence of 'men in suits' and 'tick-box charlies' (Jones, 2000: 24-25), the progressive centralization of authority and decision-making (Face, 1995) and the creation of an unaccountable and personally politicized elite (Stokes & Clegg, 2002), contrast sharply with the image of a feeling of powerlessness among staff (Face, 1995) and a demoralized workforce (Stokes & Clegg, 2002), performing contracted, prescriptive, deskilled, and tightly controlled and measured tasks in a bland atmosphere of compliance, uniformity and standardization (Jones, 2000). Such is the reality of doing more with less (Rees & Rodley, 1995).

CASE STUDY ORGANISATION AND METHODOLOGY
The case involves a public sector organization (pseudonym AGRO) situated in an eastern state of Australia. A public sector organization was regarded as highly suitable for such a study following the argument of Warhurst and Thompson (1998) that such organizations have become more bureaucratized as control by professionals has given way to tighter managerial control. The organization's purpose stems from the early 1900s when roads and bridges were first constructed and drivers and their vehicles first licensed. It evolved during the mid-1900s as two separate state government departments, one of which managed roads, and the other managed driver and vehicle licensing. These functions were combined under one government organization in 1989, AGRO.

Thus, AGRO's culture has developed for almost a century within the context of a hierarchical, bureaucratic government department managed by engineers. AGRO is a complex organization with regard to a number of factors, such as functions, size, dispersion, and hierarchy. It is responsible for the development of the national and state road networks, managing traffic flow, promotion of road safety and traffic regulations, licensing drivers, and the registration of vehicles in its state. The

organization maintains over 20,000 kilometres of roads, over 4,000 bridges, ferries, and countless traffic lights, roundabouts and road signs. Its total annual roads programme expenditure is approximately US$1.4 billion. It licenses over four million drivers and registers their vehicles, processing 75,000 registration and licensing transactions per day. AGRO employed almost 6,500 full-time staff in 2002, spread throughout offices and depots in more than 200 locations in its state. It is structured according to nine separate business functions. In turn these functions are clustered into four overarching organizational categories – corporate support, funder, purchaser, and provider. There are ten levels in the AGRO hierarchy from the CEO down to the roadwork labourer.

AGRO operates in a strong political environment, which considerably constrains CEO discretion. When AGRO was first established as a merged organization in 1989 it enjoyed a decentralized structure of five regions, each with its own regional director. Each region had a high degree of autonomy, managing many of its own functions, including human resources (HR), and being able to develop a high degree of flexibility and performance achievement to distinguish itself from neighbouring regions. Politically this accorded with the state government's decentralization agenda of the early 1990s, which encouraged development of remote locations to create non-metropolitan employment.

Data was obtained through 25 tape-recorded and transcribed interviews conducted with a range of AGRO subordinates over the period 2000-2002. Eleven of the interviewees held no formal power-holding positions, whilst the remaining fourteen occupied lower and middle management positions. The authors collected and analysed the data through an emergent methodology in conjunction with line-by-line coding, category construction, and the use of theoretical sampling to pursue important themes as they emerged (Glaser, 1998).

CLEANING-UP PROCESS
The cleaning-up process within AGRO has been executed in an incremental and serial manner since the mid 1990s and is still continuing. The outer context (Pettigrew, 1987) for the changes comprises governmental demands for increased accountability in public service provision, which has been operationalised within an inner context that comprises four major components of the cleaning-up process: centralization, policy deployment, TQM codification, and the purchaser-provider contract culture. Political accountability has thus been strongly, if not exclusively, led by considerations of financial efficiency and by cost-related numerical performance targets (du Gay, 2000). At the same time as these developments have been activated they have translated into on-going impacts on the roles and expectations of individual subordinates within AGRO.

Centralisation constituted the initial strategy in the cleaning-up process, and acted to reverse the previous emphasis on decentralisation and autonomy. Due to strong external political pressure, with demands for a refocusing on core business and more central accountability and control, a new CEO was appointed (who quickly acquired the nickname 'the axe'). Regional autonomy was progressively dismantled and major functions were centralized and standardized. In particular, the HR function was centralized within a powerful Corporate Services division at Head Office and provided the focus for a standardized set of HR and other strategies and programmes

to be established. The primary goal of such programmes was focused on financial performance and efficiency – better ways of doing the job, reducing waste and saving money. Thus, centralization removed the flexibility and discretion of those subordinates who had previously served the needs of independent regions. Instead, they now found themselves beholden to standardized policies, owned and enforced 'from on high' by newly-empowered senior executives. Such executives were placed on short-term performance-based contracts, and under a regime of 'policy deployment' they cascaded goals, objectives and targets downwards through the hierarchy. Codification and monitoring, in the guise of 'best practice' procedures, became the order of the day. Accordingly, subordinates found themselves 'looking upwards' to meet the needs and performance objectives of senior managers rather than 'looking outwards' to meet the needs and requirements of customers. Fitting in, following orders, meeting targets, and 'making your boss look good' constituted key elements of the new bureaucratic culture.

At this point in the process, enter TQM as a further weapon in the incremental and serial cleaning-up agenda. TQM had previously been introduced in 1992 and had originally been used as an empowerment, problem-solving, and improvement mechanism, employing such techniques as quality circles, process mapping, Australian Quality Awards assessments, and continuous improvement. However, its usefulness as an integral part of the cleaning-up process was soon realised, and the concept was quickly commandeered, adapted, and consequently abused in its new role as a control and systematization tool. TQM, thus redefined, fitted in well with, and reinforced, the evolving codification and invigilation culture at AGRO. This became increasingly evident as AGRO moved on to the next and latest progression in the cleaning-up agenda, that of instituting a contract, purchaser-provider culture. An embryonic funder-provider split was commenced in 1995 which by 2001 had crystallized into a definite funder-purchaser-provider demarcation. Service level agreements and competitive tendering have imposed a rigid cost and efficiency perspective on internal operations staff since 1999. A certain core of work is still guaranteed to internal staff under a preferred supplier status, but most work is now subject to competitive tendering. To support this development, the latest reincarnation of TQM has evolved to an emphasis on 'quality plans'. These set out all the basic activities that ensure that projects will be completed 'to standard'. Quality, environment, and safety issues are all combined into integrated system plans that become an integral part of the bidding and operations cultures. Outcomes are assessed and measured according to tight performance criteria. Thus, the contract-TQM partnership has acted to reinforce the already strong emphasis placed on the concepts of monitoring, codification, standardization, and prescription, whilst simultaneously locating these measures within a new and powerful cultural environment dominated by work intensification, job insecurity and cost minimisation.

IMPACT ON SUBORDINATES
In general, we found that AGRO subordinates did not question the overall vision of the organisation to achieve greater competitiveness, efficiency and productivity. On the contrary, they wanted the organisation to survive and prosper. What they did question was the "*price*" that had to be paid by subordinates to achieve a strategic vision that had been devised and implemented by "*remote and faceless*" senior executives. 'Disempowerment' and 'powerlessness' were common themes raised by our respondents as the cleaning-up process had acted to remove the informal power

resources, discretion and control exercised by subordinates in the original AGRO. In particular, the cleaning-up process had acted to break the nexus between subordinates' perception of their potential and their perception of their current reality. Most subordinates expect to perform at, or approaching, their full potential. However, we found that the cleaning-up process had a significant impact on the roles and expectations of subordinates with respect to their perceptions of the extent to which they believed that their potential was being fully realised within this tightened-up bureaucratic culture. In particular, we found that the cleaning-up process had created two distinct types of subordinates – those who were 'limited' (operating below their perception of their potential), and those who were 'overloaded' (operating above their perception of their potential). Such subordinates tend to experience certain familiar negative emotions and act out a range of detrimental behavioural patterns.

Some examples taken from our research will make these concepts clearer. Linda (a training manager) is a limited subordinate. Previously she enjoyed a good deal of discretion in her role. With specific responsibilities within a defined region she was responsible for conducting needs analyses and devising and delivering custom-made programmes to meet the flexible requirements of independent regions. Her role was extremely customer focused. However, centralisation and standardisation of training programmes robbed her of much of the discretion and flexibility in her job. She now finds her job to involve higher levels of prescription and she is far more beholden to the dictates of her (inaccessible) senior management than she ever was. She has lost her close contact with customers and finds herself unable to respond to their needs through her own discretion. As a result, Linda finds herself "*less challenged*" by her job and is unable to "*exact anything from it*". Her frustration has led to a loss of "*that feeling of affection*" for the organisation and a consequent "*lack of loyalty*" to AGRO. Vera (a service delivery crew member) has also been limited by the cleaning-up process. Under the new contract culture her crew can only provide services for which it is being paid. Since the crew must now account for all its time and costs it can no longer provide any extra form of assistance, as it had done in the past, to other crews or carry out any task not listed on its work order. For Vera, this has created an "*adversarial model*". This, for her, "*destroys the notion of a supportive attitude and the concept of acting as one organisation*" and has the consequence of "*killing the desire to do a good job*" amongst crew members.

John (a contracts administrator) is an overloaded subordinate. The transition to cleaned-up status in AGRO created a range of new jobs and opportunities that had not existed in the original bureaucratic form. Examples include jobs in quality management, performance planning, and contracts management. People were often moved into these positions from other areas of the organisation. John is one of these people. With the transition to a contract culture he was moved from the slimmed-down 'operations' area to the expanding 'purchaser' side of AGRO. John considers himself to be a "*hands on*" person. He now believes himself to be "*out of my comfort zone*". He states he has "*no aptitude*" for the job and has received inadequate training. His manager continually "*hovers over me*" pointing out his mistakes. He feels under-resourced, vulnerable and exposed. John's hands trembled as he spoke to the researcher. He was considering leaving the organisation and working for his brother. But his options were very restricted, "*at 48 years of age I don't have a lot of choice*".

Linda, Vera and John harbour resentment towards AGRO. They openly blame the organisation for creating their predicament. All three of them want to be 'unleashed'. Unleashed subordinates enjoy an 'attainment equilibrium' wherein they perceive themselves as having achieved their potential, or else as making adequate progress towards reaching their potential. Linda, Vera and John previously enjoyed such status. They describe themselves as previously experiencing such emotions as fulfilment, satisfaction, commitment, enthusiasm, excitement and meaningfulness. In consequence they "*looked forward to their work*" and acted out such typical behaviours as displaying effort, being creative, exhibiting cooperativeness, and showing a general willingness to "*go the extra mile*". However, the cleaning-up process has robbed them of these emotions and behaviours.

We found that since AGRO subordinates believe that the organisation is responsible for creating their problem, it should also assume responsibility for the solution. But how can such an organisation help, and respond to the needs of, limited and overloaded subordinates? In general, subordinates looked to their more immediate supervisors and managers to reduce the 'price' that they had to pay and direct them towards regaining a new 'unleashed' status. They expected immediate managers to act as a 'shield' to protect them from the more extreme measures devised by senior executives. The process of shielding is comprised of two separate actions (using in-vovo codes of respondents), namely "*supporting us as individuals*" and "*softening the blow*".

'Subordinate-supporting strategies' are those which offer assistance and encouragement to subordinates within an overall caring context. Steve describes this as being "*nice to know management is on your side*". Such strategies aim to develop the knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes of subordinates. Our interviews contained four main categories of such strategies: 'team involvement' (to develop skills revolving around ownership, partnership, and making a contribution), 'skills enhancement' (through formal training, work experience, or learning opportunities), 'positive guidance' (such as feedback, mentoring, and confidence building), and 'help and affirmation' (such as assistance, listening, and giving credit). Subordinates were invariably drawn to managers who displayed honesty, credibility, trustworthiness and integrity. Our interviews were liberally sprinkled with comments about managers who "*will not lie to us*", or were "*straight down the middle*".

'Environment-softening strategies' are those which aim at mitigating the constraining effect of the cleaned-up work environment as it impacts on subordinates' performance. Although subordinates hold corporate executives responsible for creating the cleaned-up work environment, they expect their immediate managers to mitigate the adverse consequences as they impact on them. We found that both limited and overloaded subordinates expect such managers to continually display such 'softening' initiatives by utilizing such approaches as job transfers, re-designing jobs and processes, reducing communication barriers, and establishing additional structural integrational mechanisms.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
In this paper we have examined the case of AGRO (a typical government bureaucracy in an eastern Australian state) that has undergone a cleaning-up process involving four major components since the mid-1990s: centralisation, policy deployment, TQM

codification, and a purchaser-provider contract culture. We have argued that these reforms have merely created an attenuated and more efficient version of bureaucracy (Hales, 2002). Subordinate expectations in this environment place emphasis on the importance of 'shielding' processes on the part of their more immediate managers to mitigate the excesses of senior executives' policy making within the cleaned-up bureaucratic context characterised by increased subordinate powerlessness.

We have argued that bureaucracy in its cleaned-up version exacerbates the tendency of this form of organization to disempower subordinates. We have previously noted how post-war Western bureaucracies in their unreconstituted state, frequently afforded subordinates informal power resources and discretion based on inconsistent or indulgent application of rules, and control over certain areas of uncertainty. However, the process of cleaning-up bureaucracies acts to remove the managerial slack that sustains such practices. Ironically, the change sequences which act to move subordinates into this scenario of increased threat and survival are often hidden within the guise of such processes as 'quality' and 'empowerment' – as was the case at AGRO. Feelings of increased powerlessness influence the manner in which subordinates consider their possible selves, in terms of closing the gap between their potential and their actual reality. We have argued that the cleaning-up process further removes what little control subordinates had in the old bureaucracies to assume personal responsibility for reaching their potential. In effect, subordinates can suffer from a form of 'learned helplessness' (Seligman, 1993), a condition whereby individuals often find themselves unable to help, or look after, themselves. Individuals who are often inclined to feel lost within (or downtrodden by) the system realize that through their own efforts they are severely constrained in their attempts to close the gap between their actual and potential self-states. The learned helplessness of the cleaned-up bureaucratic subordinate can help to explain the reliance of such individuals on their more immediate organizational managers to play a crucial role in helping them to reach their overall potential.

Our findings reveal the paradoxical role occupied by lower and middle managers in the cleaned-up bureaucracy. On the one hand they are expected to exercise strong control over subordinates in order to achieve the specific 'policy-deployed' goals, objectives and targets mandated by senior executives, whilst on the other hand they are expected by their subordinates to employ supportive and softening counter measures to shield them from the adverse effect of such policies as they impact on subordinates from 'on high'.

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