Meritocracy for
Public Service Excellence

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ⓒ *Google Art Project /* Detail of the fresco *Effects of Good Government in the City* by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, housed in the Palazzo Publicco in Siena, Italy.

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Foreword

The Regional Hub of Civil Service in Astana (ACSH) and the UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence (GCPSE) in Singapore enjoy an excellent close working collaboration.

The GCPSE was set up in 2012 by the Government of Singapore and the UNDP to be a catalyst for promoting effective reforms of public service in developing countries.

The ACSH was established in 2013 by 25 countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States, Central Asia, the Caucasus region and beyond, as well as several international organisations. It has financial and institutional support from the Government of Kazakhstan and backing of the UNDP as an implementing partner. It supports building institutional and human capacities in the region, and facilitates experience and solutions sharing on strengthening civil services and fostering cooperation in this area among participating countries.

This discussion paper is the product of the shared philosophy of the ACSH and the GCPSE. Both organisations seek to empower policymakers to build effective 21st century public service through the *AIM (Adaptive Impartial Meritocratic) for Excellence* approach in public service. This is founded on our common belief that the evidence is clear: Development happens where an impartial public service treats all equitably and fairly, building citizens' trust in government; where recruitment and promotion are based on ability; and where continuous learning is the basis for implementing incremental reform.

This paper therefore examines why development requires meritocracy in public service. We know that research shows that states with a civil service characterised by meritocratic recruitment and predictable, rewarding career ladders are associated with higher economic growth rates. Meritocracy in public services also has a significant impact on public servants' motivation, and a motivated and trusted public service will be essential for the successful achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

But what exactly is 'meritocracy'?

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Introduction

Meritocracy, or government by those with talent, seems self-evidently a good idea. The most able people will produce the best possible results and therefore the public welfare of the whole population will be optimized. Meritocracy therefore offers a fair system, which results in better outcomes for both the individual and society. Meritocracy provides talented and hard-working people from all walks of life with a means of advancement and the opportunity to contribute to the wellbeing of the larger society. It can be a powerful vehicle for social mobility and incentivize people to do their best and reach their fullest potential.

Furthermore, a country governed by the best and the brightest must surely be better run than one that is not: and there is good evidence to support that conclusion: for example, research suggests that states run by meritocracies have higher rates of economic growth than those that do not. The highly influential 1997 World Development Report asserted that "Making a meritocracy of the civil service helps bring in high-quality staff, confers prestige on civil service positions, and can do a great deal to motivate good performance." (World Bank 1997, 92) In addition, "Where instead promotions are personalized or politicized, civil servants worry more about pleasing their superiors of influential politicians, and efforts to build prestige through tough recruitment standards are undercut." (World Bank 1997, 93).

Singapore offers a fine example. The country's founding father and first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, argued: "If you want Singapore to succeed…you must have a system that enables the best man and the most suitable to go into the job that needs them…"[1] In 1965, the city-state was a small trading port with an unemployment rate of 14 percent. Fifty years later, its unemployment rate had dropped to 1.9%. In 1959 Singapore's GDP per capita was $510. Fifty years later it is 100 times bigger. His success is exemplified by the fact that Singapore's per capita income is now far higher that of its former colonial master, Great Britain. Whatever Lee Kuan Yew may have got wrong, on meritocracy he was apparently completely right.

> *If you want Singapore to succeed… you must have a system that enables the best man and the most suitable to go into the job that needs them.*
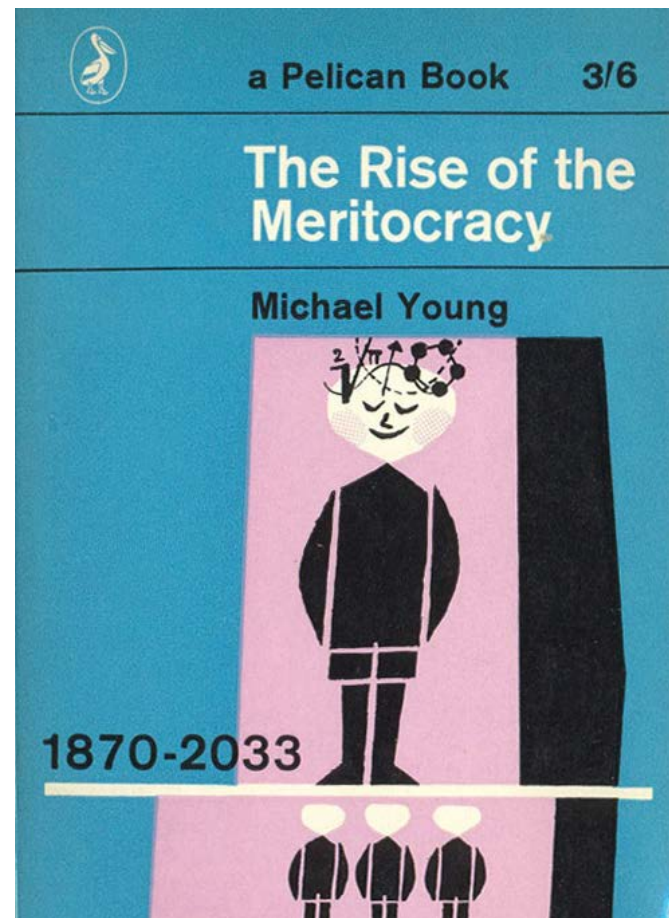> *- Lee Kuan Yew*

Yet, at a time of rising inequality around the globe, it is important to create and reflect a more level playing field, through public service excellence. Inequality is often entrenched and inherited.[2] High quality education, access to healthcare, and good public transportation, for example, can all contribute towards providing citizens with equal opportunities for advancement. In an increasingly unequal world it will be important that meritocracy does not devolve into elitism, with little opportunity for those that are not already privileged to move ahead. It is also important to recognize that meritocracy does not obviate the need for transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. Meritocracy after all, does not exist in isolation.

It is interesting to note that the term was first used in Singapore's parliament only in 1971, and the MP who raised the topic noted:

Let us... work for a society in Singapore where, on the one hand, people are rewarded and promoted on strict merit, and, on the other, ample opportunities are afforded to those who are hampered by poverty. In other words, let us build not merely a society based only on meritocracy, but let us have a meritocracy-plus society.[3]

So is this then what might be wrong with meritocracy? It is important to remember that the first use of the term was a negative one. A British sociologist called Michael Young wrote

The cover of a paperback version of Michael Young's 1958 book *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.

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1   J. Quah. 2010. *Public Administration Singapore-Style*. London, p.71.

2   T. Piketty, 2013 *Capital in the Twenty-First Century,* p.237

3   Dr Augustine H. H. Tan, 30 July 1971.

a book in 1958 called *"The Rise of the Meritocracy"*. In this book, Michael Young warned that a new elite class was emerging that was out of touch with ordinary people. This elite would increasingly marry partners of similar social backgrounds, and then use its money to buy the best possible education for its children. This has proved highly prescient, as with the 'Alumni' system in some elite universities in the US whereby the children of graduates are almost automatically accepted due to the huge weighting this fact is given by the entrance process.[4]

So meritocracy can only be judged in connection with the way societies are structured and the values they represent, in theoretical treatments, and in literature and discussions specific to civil service reform, as well as in many other contexts. Its practice can vary from one context to another. It is a term that is widely used, but despite – and perhaps because of – this, it can be surprisingly challenging to pin down.

In recent years a debate has begun in many countries about what 'merit' is regarded as best. In the early stages of development, many like Lee Kuan Yew were in no doubt it simply meant the best educated, those with the best degrees from the best universities. But this simplicity is increasingly being questioned. Don't officials also need to be in touch with the citizenry, and empathise with their lot? So scholars and politicians in countries such as Singapore and Japan with a long history of a narrowly defined concept of meritocracy, are increasingly questioning whether, for instance, a good law degree from the most elitist universities, really qualifies its proud recipient to deepen democracy through co-creation of policy with citizens, rather than simply telling them what to do.

This paper aims to stimulate thinking on how to deliver the Adaptive Impartial Meritocratic (AIM) for Excellence approach (see Page 3). To do that it is necessary to consider some of the ways meritocracy is theorised and practiced. The paper examines meritocracy in the civil service and considers how that relates to the idea of meritocracy itself.

Following this introduction, the paper looks at the question of how meritocracy is defined, and then reviews findings from the literature. Research generally shows the many benefits of meritocracy in the civil service (the concerned aspects are specified more precisely in the literature section and in the relevant papers) in the areas of increasing economic growth and reducing corruption, as well as other areas. It then looks more closely at some of the challenges of implementing meritocracy in the civil service before zooming out to look at critiques of meritocracy more broadly. Finally it briefly raises the topic of other factors that interact with meritocracy, and then concludes.

Meritocracy can be understood and practiced in different ways and it is important, in assessing it, to look closely at how it is specified in a given instance, both broadly as well as more specifically related to civil service reform. How meritocracy is understood and practiced influences the outcomes it produces.[5] It also puts forward that, as in the case of other areas of civil service reform, when it comes to how meritocracy is understood and practiced, context - including history and politics – matters greatly when it comes to reform efforts. The paper also underscores the point that meritocracy is but one of the factors which GCPSE and ACSH believe interact to shape governance outcomes.

Meritocracy is the subject of research in fields as diverse as education, business, and psychology. There is a large body of scholarship on meritocracy and its role in the civil service alone. This paper cannot and does not claim to represent or engage with all of the literature on meritocracy and the civil service, let alone the larger body of scholarship on meritocracy. The aim of the paper is to provide an introductory overview of some considerations related to the topic in regard to achieving the public service excellence needed for development.

Defining merit and meritocracy

Meritocracy can be defined with a greater or lesser degree of specificity, and therefore how clearly it can be understood varies. What meritocracy means can be very clearly specified, but it can also be necessary to pose some deeper questions about it. For example: How is merit defined? Who defines it? What is the process for defining it? Also, where is it applied (in what realm is its application being discussed)? What norms, values and principles, if any, are associated with it?[6]

Merit, Amartya Sen argues, is a contingent concept – dependent on what is considered to be a good society: "meritocracy, and more generally the practice of rewarding merit, is essentially underdefined, and we cannot be sure about its content – and thus about the claims regarding its "justice" – until some further specifications are made (concerning, in particular, the objectives to be pursued, in terms of which merit is to be, ultimately, judged). The merit of actions–and (derivatively) that of persons performing actions– cannot be judged independent of the way we understand the

> *Meritocracy, and more generally the practice of rewarding merit, is essentially underdefined, and we cannot be sure about its content ... until some further specifications are made…*
> *- Amartya Sen*

4   E. Porter. 2015. "Education Gap Between Rich and Poor is Growing Wider"

5   Writing with respect to meritocracy in the Singapore context, Donald Low in "Good Meritocracy, Bad Meritocracy" highlights the importance of how meritocracy is practiced. He argues "…that there are varieties of meritocracy, some desirable, others possibly malignant. The debate should not be over whether we embrace meritocracy or not; rather, it should be over the kind of meritocracy we want." (Low 2014, 49)

6   In their study of the practice of meritocracy in the United States and selected Asian countries, Poocharoen and Brillantes write "…one should never accept their system as being meritocratic without asking the essential questions: What does it mean exactly, what tools are being used, who is benefitting from the system, what are the trade-offs, and has the system solved the problem it is meant to solve?" (Poocharoen and Brillantes 2013, 160-161)

nature of a good (or an acceptable) society." (Sen 2000, 5-6) In other words, if meritocracy is a system for rewarding merit, then how merit is defined is obviously of crucial importance in assessing meritocracy.

While recognizing the importance of these questions and their encouragement of a critical engagement with the idea of meritocracy, at the same time it is certainly possible to put forward some of the ways that meritocracy is commonly understood. The idea of meritocracy as a social system in which "merit or talent is the basis for sorting people into positions and distributing rewards" (Scully, 1997: 413) has received great attention since the term was popularized in 1958 by Young (1994). Advocates of meritocracy stress that in true meritocratic systems everyone has an equal chance to advance and obtain rewards based on their individual merits and efforts, regardless of their gender, race, class, or other non-merit factors." (Castilla and Benard 2010, 543) Other definitions are even further specified, focusing, for example, solely on meritocracy in the civil service.

Meritocracy reinforces the notion of equality and competence as it rejects patronage, nepotism, corruption, and incompetence for entering the civil service. It is a system that values the principles of competition, open selection, careful evaluation of qualities, and of having a set of qualification standards and established recruitment process; rather than arbitrary appointment of individuals to civil service positions. Today, meritocracy in recruitment processes is often associated with having education qualifications, passing general exams, and satisfying position qualifications. In many cases this is accompanied by panel interviews and psychological tests. For promotion processes, meritocracy is associated with performance-based assessments of individuals with clear performance expectations and indicators to measure actions
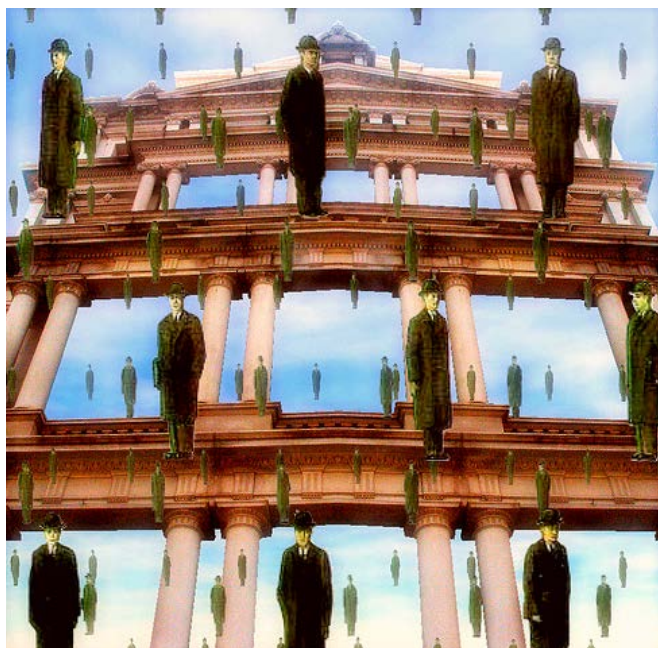
(cc) BY Oddsock / A homage to René Magritte's depiction of the faceless bureaucrat.

and results of work. However, there are great variations in the choice of instruments and the reasons to install merit systems among governments. (Poocharoen and Brillantes 2013, 143). In the context of the civil service, meritocracy is commonly discussed in connection with recruitment and promotion practices.

Literature on meritocracy

The research evidence is clear on the benefits of meritocracy in the civil service – including with respect to linkages with higher economic growth and reduced corruption - and sheds light on various aspects of the practice of meritocracy. However, as the GCPSE 'theory of change' suggests, with respect to civil service reform in general, there is much that remains unknown about 'what works' and how to do it. Previous civil service reform efforts have met with mixed success.[7] The literature on the impact of bureaucratic structures on valued social outcomes "is dominated by case studies and a few case comparisons, and researchers have rarely resorted to large and comparative empirical investigations, mainly due to the lack of comparative observational data on bureaucratic structures, especially of a time-series character." (Nitotskaya and Cingolani 2014, 3-4) In addition, even with greater evidence, the importance of contextualization would remain paramount – something discussed in further detail in this section.

▸ **Meritocratic features and economic growth**

An important study by Evans and Rauch (1999) considered whether state bureaucracies characterized by meritocratic recruitment and predictable, rewarding career ladders are associated with higher growth rates. Because the data, economic growth in 35 developing countries between 1970 and 1990, refer primarily to core economic agencies, the implication is not that the entire bureaucratic apparatus must be structured in this way to have positive effects on growth. Having Weberian structures in the strategic core of the bureaucracy may be sufficient. (Evans and Rauch 1999, 760).

Evans and Rauch underline the importance of meritocratic recruitment, which ideally is based on some combination of education and examination (Gerth and Mills 1958: 241; Parsons 1964: 333, 339), needs to be considered with a second characteristic: a predictable career ladder, which provides long-term tangible and intangible rewards for those recruited into the bureaucracy (Gerth and Mills 1958: 200-203; Parsons 1964: 334-35; Stinchcombe 1974)." (Evans and Rauch 1999, 751).

▸ **Reduced corruption**

The evidence shows that meritocratic recruitment reduces corruption, while other allegedly relevant bureaucratic

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7   See e.g. "The most recent evaluation of the World Bank's activities in public sector reform between 1999 and 2006 confirms the bleak picture. Alarmingly it states that despite the high share of bank projects with a substantial CSR aspect, civil service and administrative reform projects have the lowest success rate-below 45%-among the four subareas of public sector reform which the report evaluates (World Bank Evaluation Group 2008)." (Brösamle 2012, 2)

factors, such as public employees' competitive salaries, career stability, or internal promotion, do not have a significant impact. (Dahlström, Lapuente and Teorell 2012). The study, covering 52 countries, suggests that a professional bureaucracy works to reduce corruption because it creates a separation of interests between bureaucrats and politicians. The authors conclude that corruption is prevented not because merit-recruited bureaucrats are "better types" than the political appointee, but simply that they are "different types." Both politicians and the professional bureaucracy need to be involved to deter corrupt behaviour. "Relatively high levels of corruption may thus also be expected from an administration that consists exclusively of merit-based bureaucrats without control by agents with a different (e.g., political) nature." (Dahlström, Lapuente and Teorell 2012, 659).

The internal organization of a public body is a major determinant of corruption. Three features of the organization are systematically associated with less corruption: having decisions regularly audited by external or internal auditors; maintaining open and transparent procedures; and basing personnel decisions on criteria of merit and professional competence. Moreover, meritocracy at the top - the procedure for appointing the head of the agency - also matters. "Agencies whose head is popularly elected are systematically more corrupt and adopt worse internal organizations, while independent agencies whose head is appointed by a political body tend to have better organizational design." (Recanatini, Prati and Tabellini 2005).

▸ **Other benefits of meritocracy in the civil service**

Other evidence suggests merit-based recruitment and promotion through predictable, rewarding career ladders improve civil servants' capability and performance (Anderson et al. 2003) and are valued by citizens as an accountability mechanism (McCourt 2000).

A merit-based system can also help attract well-educated individuals. This is important as higher educational attainment among civil servants is linked to higher tax revenue mobilization, reduced corruption, better public financial management and higher economic growth (Arezki and Quintyn 2013; Arezki et al. 2012; Rao 2013, 16)

A report published by UNDP notes that, "the civil service at the national and local levels is a key system on which the state relies to fulfil its obligations towards its citizens. Thus, to function effectively and reach its development agenda, a country must prioritize investments in a professional, merit-based civil service and strengthen local governments responsible for overseeing or delivering basic social services, especially to the poor and other vulnerable groups … the capacity of institutions to provide evidence-based analysis of the situation and sound policy options to address the crisis is critical. This fundamental capacity is grounded on the continuous availability of experienced

and well-trained staff in key government institutions and central economic agencies, such as ministries of planning, finance and central banks (Nelson 1990, ODI 2010)." [8] (UNDP 2011, 274)

▸ **Other considerations: on meritocratic recruitment mechanisms and on the 'paradox of meritocracy'**

But is the rigorous national exam, a method started in AD 605 in China, the best selection process? With meritocracy in practice, the utility of formal civil service examinations depends on whether and how context can influence the best method for conducting meritocratic recruitment. Recruitment to the civil service is, in order to prevent patronage, often centralized and based on performance in competitive examinations. This approach, albeit slow and occasionally cumbersome, is generally assumed to be the most meritocratic method of recruitment. However, 'gaming' leads aspirants to focus on passing the exam rather than being good officials. While some applicants may have skills suited for a specific position, they may not perform best in a general examination. As long as the system is not abused, a more flexible recruitment process based on, for example, interviews and CV screening, may be more meritocratic. It is therefore necessary to weigh the risk of abuse against the potential gains from more flexibility. Formal civil service examinations may therefore be the most meritocratic way to recruit civil servants only in countries where the risk for patronage is high. (Sundell 2014).

Research also suggests a 'paradox of meritocracy' - that when the culture of an organization explicitly promotes meritocracy, managers may show more gender bias (for men/against women). The paradox of meritocracy may seem counterintuitive but when individuals are led to feel unbiased, objective, or fair, they are more likely to express biased behavior. So meritocracy may be more difficult than it first appears and have hidden risks (Castilla and Benard 2010, 572) Identifying difficulty in implementing a more meritocratic system does not of course imply that women would fare better under a different system, given that they may be generally excluded from male-dominated patronage and power networks. (Rao 2013, 10, citing Goetz 2003).

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8   Kohli 2004 finds a high degree of correlation between superior bureaucracy and high rates of economic growth (e.g., the Republic of Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, India), and poor quality bureaucracy and low rates of economic growth (e.g., Nigeria, the Congo, Argentina and Syria): see also(UNDP 2011, 286

On the critical importance of context

The critical importance of taking bureaucratic history and politics into account is widely accepted.[9] In *Jobs for the Boys*, which examines six cases of past and four cases of contemporary efforts to move away from patronage and towards civil service systems,[10] Grindle writes that, "All reforms take place in historical contexts that shape and constrain possibilities for change, as the increasingly influential literature on historical institutionalism argues. This is certainly true for cases explored in this book. Patronage systems-their purpose, coherence, and structure-shaped what replaced them and significantly influenced the trajectory of how they were replaced. These systems, and the potential to alter them, were in turn products of how they reflected broader institutional and historical contexts and were shaped by them. In particular, the degree to which state leaders were able to dominate decision making, the effects of class and education systems, and the extent to which patronage systems had been captured by political parties emerged as important factors explaining differences and similarities among cases." (Grindle 2012, 244-245) Grindle also describes ways that change does happen, and notes that institutional reform is shaped by actors and strategic choices have a role in shaping outcomes, just as institutional legacies do." (Grindle 2012, 250).

The importance of understanding the ways that politics affect civil service reform efforts is also recognized because of "the primacy of politics in the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of systems of appointment to public office." (Grindle 2012, Preface, x) After proposing ways that data on civil service reform could be improved and arguing for the imperative to try and do so, Brösamle says that even if we did have better data, civil service reform success hinges on domestic politics at the national level.

The distance between theory and practice and other common problems in civil service reform

Many reforms or legal protections may exist on paper, but are often not implemented or made real in practice. Unsurprisingly, the same can be the case with reforms aimed at introducing greater meritocracy in the civil service. It is clear from a wide range of examples, from reforms specifically directed towards promoting meritocracy, to other kinds of governance reforms, that reform on paper does not necessarily mean reform in practice and that, in determining whether a system is meritocratic, looking beyond the formal system at the actual practice is important.

Grindle's examination of reform attempts in Latin America illustrates this point particularly well. With respect to attempts to reform patronage systems in Latin America, Grindle write that, "In summary, by the 2000s, Latin American countries were not deficient in laws mandating selection of public administrators on the basis of merit or setting up equivalents of a civil service commission to undertake recruitment and ensure fair treatment and the political neutrality of public sector workers.

Yet despite the consistency of this history throughout the region, in the early years of the new century, only Costa Rica, Chile, and Brazil recruited significant numbers of public sector workers through a structured career civil service system. Indeed, the implementation of civil service legislation was extremely weak in Latin America. As concluded in the IDB study: 'It is precisely the divergence between the norms and the practices that is the greatest weakness of civil service systems in their countries.'"(Grindle 2012,151)[11].

(cc) *Eduardo Arrares /* Protestors in Brazil march against price-rises on public transport.

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9   E.g. Brösamle argues for greater consideration of what he calls 'bureaucratic heritage' in the context of civil service reform efforts. He remarks, "Collecting data on and understanding bureaucratic heritage-that is a country's institutional origins, history and reform path all of which co-determine current administrative institutions-is key for understanding bureaucratic quality and carrying out useful pre-CSR analyses." (Brösamle 2012, 10). Identical reforms applied in different systems, or at different development stages of similar systems, can have very different and often undesired effects: see Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004: 39). Andrews writes: "[E]ven something [as presumably universal as] bureaucracy does not convey with the same effect from place to place, primarily because every context has prevailing structures that need to be built upon or given time to evolve" (2008: 28). History and heritage directly determine many cultural factors and fundamental values which still have an effect without necessarily being visible today." (Brösamle 2012, 11).

10 Grindle describes civil service systems, the term she uses in *Jobs for the Boys*, as follows: "Patronage systems stand in great contrast to career civil service systems, in which the preponderance of nonelected public sector jobs are filled through a process of credentialing based on education, examination, or some other test of merit; in which a career ladder exists and is accessed through regularized demonstration of credentials of education, examination, tenure in office, or other form of assessing merit; in which tenure is secure barring malfeasance in office; and in which movement in and out (through retirement, for example) is regulated and compensated. 17 In such a system, the official performs duties for the state or the service, not for the patron. The rules of the game in this system are formal and objectified through regulations and procedures." (Grindle 2012, 21) Grindle's Footnote 17 above reads as follows: "Weber outlines these characteristics to demonstrate that public officials in a modern bureaucracy pursue a career of administration and work as servants of the state, not of patrons, kings, or other individuals. See Weber 1946:196-204."

11 With footnote 22, Grindle cites "Iacoviello 2006: 542. Author's translation."

Patronage systems resist, get around, and subvert reform. With respect to civil service reforms with a variety of aims, the following have been identified as typical pitfalls:

▶ Giving insufficient attention to politics and patronage

▶ Attempting to transplant one country's structures and practices to another country without due consideration of contexts

▶ Over-emphasising downsizing and cost-cutting

▶ Failing to integrate reform activities into a wider policy and organizational framework. (Rao 2013, 10)

Having explored some of the relevant research, the next section explores meritocracy in practice in the context of the civil service in further depth.

Meritocracy in practice in the civil service

This section is not a guide to implementing meritocracy. Rather it is meant to provide examples of some of the issues and considerations that may arise when seeking to implement meritocracy, which would have implications for what meritocracy means in practice. It points again to the fact that when it comes to assessing meritocracy, it is important to look at how it is specified and how it is enacted in practice.

In his Working Paper on "The Merit System and Integrity in the Public Service," Willy McCourt notes it is not as easy to define 'merit' as we may think. As a starting point we can define it as 'the appointment of the best person for any given job'. That is bland, but the practical implications can be controversial." (McCourt 2007, 5).[12] This definition of merit implies the following:

▶ *Jobs at every level:* merit principles apply as much to promotion as to initial recruitment

▶ *The best candidate:* demonstrably the most able among a number of candidates, any of whom could do the job adequately

▶ *Open to all:* no internal-only appointments or restricted shortlists

▶ *Systematic, transparent and challengeable:* we welcome challenges to our decisions, including from the unsuccessful candidates, viewing them as valuable feedback which will help us make better decisions in future

Thus in a pure merit system all public appointments, from top to bottom, are made following a competition based on merit rules that are publicly understood and can be challenged if a breach is suspected. (McCourt 2007, 6)

But a number of categories exist where exceptions to merit could be made: 1. *"Elected officials"* ("First and obviously, some officials are elected, not appointed."); 2. *"Political and 'direct' appointments"*; 3. *"Affirmative action"*; 4. *"Internal*

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12 However, it might be noted that this definition seems to skip the even more fundamental step of defining what is "best".

appointments and transfers; local managers' discretion"; 5. "Other appointments: succession plans, secondments, temporary 'acting up', reallocation of duties, sub-contracting to employment agencies etc." (McCourt 2007, 6-7)

It may be reasonable that merit should be overridden in some of these cases. Even in the case of elected officials, some countries impose educational criteria: for instance, candidates for Presidential elections in Angola and Turkey must possess certain educational qualifications alongside meeting other criteria.

On the question of politicization and patronage in the civil service, UNDP has noted that civil service reform efforts around the world, to various extents, have all stressed the need for increased depoliticization of the civil service, promoting the ideal of a neutral and merit-based civil service. Evidence shows however that pure merit-based systems are the exception and that political appointments are common in most civil services…. A more realistic policy line takes into consideration the pros and cons of both the merit system and the patronage system, in a given political and socio-economic context. In general, patronage should be exceptional and restricted by means of efficient checks and balances that limit the discretionary powers of politicians over recruitments and promotions. Therefore, patronage in the civil service should be linked to merit selections, embedded in a strong ethical framework and counterbalanced by an effective system of checks and balances. The following elements ensure that this is achieved:

▶ Identification and publication of the complete list of positions that are considered political in nature.

▶ Clear procedures for recruitment and promotion, ensuring transparency in the selection process and inclusion of formal checks and balances and appeals in the case of arbitrary action.

▶ Restricted discretionary powers of politicians over selection processes (short-listing of candidates should be the sole responsibility of a pluralistic selection panel)

▶ A code of conduct that stresses the political neutrality and loyalty of the civil servants (i.e. they commit to execute and support the policies of the government in place).

▶ Constitutional and legal guarantees (Civil Service Act) stressing the right of candidates for (non political) public employment, not to be discriminated against because of their gender, ethnic origin, political, economic, religious, philosophical, cultural or social opinions or conditions. (UNDP 2004, 12-13)

"Obstacles to merit" include "political patronage (clientelism) and nepotism. Financial corruption, while common, is usually covert because it is widely disapproved of. But in many countries the 'patron' can present himself or herself as a social altruist, discharging a noble obligation to political supporters, family members and others." (McCourt 2007, 8) Another obstacle is "definitions of merit. A faulty definition of merit

ACSH / Meritocracy in action. New senior executive service corps "A" officers in Kazakhstan being briefed on their mission and high responsibilities.

may facilitate corruption. Firstly, if merit is defined to mean merely 'able to do the job', and there are many candidates thus able, selectors can exploit the resulting ambiguity to appoint their (barely able) relative or supported in preference to another (outstandingly able) candidate. It will be harder for a patron to insert a client into a job where knowledge and skill requirements are precisely specified than into one where they are left vague." (McCourt 2007, 8) Thus the range of issues that can arise in implementing meritocracy and the technical and local/contextual knowledge required to navigate them, begins to emerge.

Merit-based selection mechanisms, the importance of their quality, and the question of how well assessment criteria track on to performance raise questions such as - what is the basis for assessment/what is being tested and how relevant is it to job demands are of critical importance? Inappropriate selection mechanisms could result in negative unintended outcomes.

A comparison of merit systems in the United States and Asia confirms how merit is defined and how it is enacted, varies by country. The purpose for using merit-based systems also varies. Another interesting aspect concerns merit-protection regimes – which encompass a range of ways to support merit-based systems that can be used to support merit-based recruitment and promotion - mentioning freedom of information and laws designed to protect whistle-blowers, provision of relevant training, job ads that clearly specify standards, and other measures. Developing merit-protection regimes may be a possible means of achieving improved merit systems in Asia. On merit-protection regimes, the importance of looking at meritocracy as a system that requires a comprehensive design rather than solely focusing on certain instruments such as examinations. (Poocharoen and Brillantes 2013, 159).

Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Examples from monitoring reports of the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan

Monitoring reports of the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan, a peer reviewed programme under the OECD Anti-Corruption Network for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, provide examples of efforts by governments in Eastern Europe and Central Asia in promoting greater meritocracy in the civil service and recommend areas for further reform.

In 1999 **Kazakhstan** became the first among Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries to introduce a special law on civil service together with compulsory open competition, delineate political and career civil servants and establish a Civil Service Agency. The implementation of the new civil service model, approved by the President of Kazakhstan in 2011 and also a 'first' among CIS countries, led to the establishment of a Senior Executive Service "Corps A" and the strengthening of Human Resources units of state agencies, so that the work on developing tests for assessing applicants' competencies could be started.

In March 2015, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev announced five institutional reforms, including the establishment of "a modern, professional and autonomous state apparatus". One of the other dimensions of civil service reform that the President emphasized was the development of a meritocratic approach to staffing and the necessity to open recruitment to civil service positions for talented candidates - including those from the private sector and foreign managers, without imposing requirements of language knowledge and

citizenship for certain positions. Furthermore, the President noted that it was important to establish systematic approaches for the protection of meritocratic principles and prevention of corruption. Thus, meritocracy is seen as an universal principle not only for the executive but also for other organs of state including the courts, law enforcement agencies, as well as national companies and holdings.

According to the Round 3 Monitoring Report of the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan, Kazakhstan's efforts at strengthening meritocracy in recruitment and promotion in the civil service include: centralized testing for aspirants to the country's "Corps B" civil service, publication of information on all vacancies on public agency websites, and the possibility of observers attending sessions of evaluation commissions. With respect to the smaller, high-level "Corps A" of Kazakhstan's civil servants, a separate procedure applies, where recruitment is managed by the National Human Resources Policies Commission.

With regard to this process, the OECD report noted: "… the [National Human Resources Policies] Commission comprises representatives of the legislative and executive branch and higher public officials who have managerial experience and skills necessary to evaluate professional and personal qualities. Its decisions are based, *inter alia,* on the results of testing and information on prior rewards awarded to candidates".

The OECD report also observed: "Generally, there has been certain progress in civil service recruitment, including: introduction of centralized testing of knowledge and skills of Corps "B" civil servants and somewhat similar centralized recruitment of the Corps "A" service reserve; introduction since 2013 of the competitive procedure applicable to the recruitment for category "A" public offices and since 2014, evaluation of civil servants' performance, where positive assessment leads to incentives; and a radical reduction in the number of political public servants".

The question of the division of positions into the category of either political or administrative arises in the case of Kazakhstan, as it does in other countries. In the case of Kazakhstan, the OECD report noted: "The number of political positions was significantly reduced (although the list still includes positions which are not in fact political)." (OECD 2014b, 5) It should be noted that efforts in professionalizing the civil service apparatus in Kazakhstan are still ongoing and this analysis represents a snapshot of results achieved till date.

In **Georgia** the civil service online recruitment portal www.hr.gov.ge/eng, a successful project of the Civil Service Bureau of Georgia, was launched in June 2011. Introduction of this portal eased both competition announcement and application procedures. Importantly, the launch of the recruitment portal promoted unhindered access to employment opportunities in the civil service. Other measures to introduce meritocratic practices in Georgia's civil service include:

▸ Mandatory announcement of a competition for a vacant position (since 2010);

▸ Posting information on vacancies in the civil service on the web-site www.hr.gov.ge (mandatory since 2011);

▸ Compulsory submission of applications for vacancies in the civil service via www.hr.gov.ge (since 2011);

▸ Decreased terms of competition;

▸ Limiting the possibility of appointing a candidate to a temporary vacancy without due process; and

▸ Inclusion of job descriptions in competition announcements.

The initiative has offered the wider public unprecedented access to professional opportunities within the civil services, an employment market that was previously dogged by closed and nepotistic recruitment practices (Information provided by Civil Service Bureau of Georgia, October 2015).

In **Azerbaijan** the Civil Service Commission was established by Presidential decree on 19 January 2005. One of the main responsibilities of the Commission is to organize and carry out centralized civil service recruitment to roles classified as 5th-7th administrative positions, by competition and interview.

A later Presidential decree dated 5 September 2012 launched the "National Anti-Corruption Action Plan (NACAP) 2012-2015". The NACAP has responsibility for improvement of civil servants' recruitment and promotion, including implementation of a competition-based and transparent recruitment process (Information provided by the Civil Service Commission of Azerbaijan).

The OECD report indicated that Azerbaijan has taken steps to put into practice the recruitment of lower-level civil servants through a competitive process; however it also highlighted the need for greater transparency in the recruitment of higher-level civil servants (OECD 2013, 60-61).

In **Moldova** "substantial progress was achieved in the development of a merit based civil service. The new law on Public Office and Status of Civil Servants, that was based on EU good practice guidelines, was adopted in July 2008 and came into force on 1 January 2009. The legislation introduced merit-based selection and promotion of administrative officials, and separated rules governing political and administrative officials" (CPAR Project Completion Report 2006-2013).

These measures suggest "substantial progress … in the development of a merit based civil service. Government regulations on competitive selection, performance appraisal, probation period, preparation of job descriptions, recruitment, etc. have been approved and are being implemented". (CPAR Project Completion Report 2006-2013).

However, a relatively high rate of staff turnover hinders the development of a merit based civil service in Moldova. The main reason for the high turnover is low remuneration at all the levels of public administration. "This problem affects the sustainability of other reforms due to the fact that trained professionals … are leaving state apparatus, mainly because of uncompetitive remuneration issues". (CPAR Project Completion Report 2006-2013).

The **Kyrgyz Republic** introduced measures to ensure the principle of openness and equal access to jobs in the civil service, including competitive selection for filling vacant administrative positions (Information provided by the State Personnel Service of the Kyrgyz Republic, August 2015). On initiatives in the Kyrgyz Republic, the OECD report recommended increasing the "… attraction of the civil service by developing a promotion system which will motivate civil servants [and] create merit-related criteria for civil servants' promotion to higher positions." (OECD 2012, 44)

For **Tajikistan,** the OECD report noted that the only obligatory mechanism for competitive recruitment to "administrative vacancies in the public service" was an interview, with other forms of assessment being optional, and recommended procedural improvements. (OECD 2014c, 71, 74)

BY-ND Congress of Local and Regional Authorities / Mayors of Ukrainian towns and cities take stock of public service reforms and how they impact the populations they represent.

Ukraine is implementing public service reforms developed jointly with the OECD's SIGMA programme. Competitive appointment procedures have been put in place for all civil service positions, including senior management positions. A ban on membership of political parties for civil servants has also been introduced. Presently Ukraine's Commission for Senior Civil Service is being set up, which is expected to tackle recruitment for higher managerial positions and conduct the competitive selection of applicants. As a result of these changes, senior appointments (e.g. state secretaries, heads of central executive bodies and other high offices) will no longer be based on party-political quotas or individual preferences

of incumbent officials, but only on existing professional competencies, management experience and previous achievements.

The transparency of the competitive entry process is expected to guarantee applicants equal access to public service positions and local government service. The three-step selection procedure will include a check of qualification requirements, testing and interview. A new aspect of the selection process is that at least one-third of the composition of selection committees will be members of the public, who are expected to evaluate an applicant for a position professionally and impartially (Information provided by the National Agency of Ukraine on Civil Service, August 2015).

On Ukraine, the OECD report encouraged greater clarity and transparency in recruitment and promotion processes by reforming the "… legislation on Civil Service in order to introduce clear delineation of political and professional civil servants, principles of legality and impartiality, of merit based competitive appointment and promotion and other framework requirements applicable to all civil servants, in line with good European and international practice." (OECD 2010, 53) It also recommended measures to guard against politicization in the civil service.

In the case of **Armenia**, the OECD report observed: "Merit based appointment procedures for junior officials were improved, but no such improvements were introduced for high-level officials and temporary employees." (OECD 2014a, 50). The recommendations of the report included the following, "Develop clear rules regarding positions that are to be considered for merit based appointments and ensure their enforcement in practice, maintain records about merit based appointments." (OECD 2014a, 51).

Meritocracy in context

The idea of meritocracy more generally affects meritocracy in the civil service.

Meritocracy in Singapore

Meritocracy is a central principle of governance in Singapore. In recent years there has been public discussion about how the practice of meritocracy might evolve. One commentator noted that, "Recent debates on meritocracy have invited questions on what Singapore regards as 'merit'. There seems to be agreement to expand our understanding of the term to promote more equitability. Several concepts have emerged reflecting how meritocracy is evolving in the Singapore context, such as 'compassionate meritocracy', 'trickle up meritocracy' and 'meritocracy through life'." (Anwar 2015) Discussions in Singapore illustrate that how meritocracy is understood can evolve over time and also highlights the importance of context and how it can change over time.

Meritocracy and inequality

While some inequality is to be expected, attention must be paid to the impact of inequality on eroding equality of opportunity and how inequality can be mitigated. Indeed, perfect equality would be nightmarish because of the level of government intrusion into family life implied[13] - and is impossible to achieve in any case due to people being born with different abilities, luck, etc. Many observers worry that, while some inequality may be necessary to reward talent, skills and a willingness to innovate and take entrepreneurial risk, today's extremes of economic inequality undermine growth and progress, and fail to invest in the potential of hundreds of millions of people. (Oxfam 2014, 9) Meritocracy can leave unaddressed questions about the welfare of those whose talents and abilities are not in areas deemed the most meritorious or who do not succeed for other reasons.

The question of meritocracy's relationship with inequality exists in the context of vast and increasing economic inequality in the world. Recent research indicates that "Seven out of ten people on the planet now live in countries where economic inequality is worse than it was 30 years ago," (Oxfam 2014, 30)[14] and that in early 2014, the 85 richest individuals in the world had as much wealth as the poorest half of the global population.[15] Inequality is a problem of both the developing and developed world - high and rising income inequality characterizes the developed countries of the OECD: "Income inequality in OECD countries is at its highest level for the past half century. The average income of the richest 10% of the population is about nine times that of the poorest 10% across the OECD, up from seven times 25 years ago." (OECD 2015) Research suggests that income inequality negatively impacts economic growth by hindering human capital accumulation income inequality undermines education opportunities for disadvantaged individuals, lowering social mobility and hampering skills development. (OECD 2014d, 3)

> *Seven out of ten people on the planet now live in countries where economic inequality is worse than it was 30 years ago.*

Meritocracy, through the promise of opportunity and reward, can be a source of motivation and an incentive for performance. And, cases where people believe they are unfairly denied opportunity can lead to anger. For example, in 2013, civil service exam takers in Bangladesh took to the streets to protest against the country's quota system for entry into the civil service. The provision of quality public services, such as health care and good educational opportunities for all, can play a critical role in reducing inequalities and creating a more level playing field. A more level playing field means that people have more equal opportunities for advancement. This speaks to the side of meritocracy that has to do with egalitarianism and fairness.

Even in systems that many consider meritocratic, non-merit factors can be influential. In "The Meritocracy Myth" (2004), Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller, Jr. argue that in the United States, the impact of individual merit in determining rewards is over-estimated, and that a variety of "nonmerit factors" in fact intervene in determining outcomes. Ten years later, in "The Meritocracy Myth Revisited" McNamee argues that the same factors, both merit and non-merit, are in effect and that the importance of non-merit factors has probably increased. These "non-merit factors that collectively blunt the effects of merit factors and limit opportunity for mobility" include: inheritance, social capital, cultural capital, education ("…both a merit and non-merit factor in the race to get ahead."), reduced rates of self employment, luck, and discrimination. McNamee also argues that increasing economic inequality in the U.S. reinforces these non-merit factors. (McNamee 2014).

In the United States, while College has become virtually a precondition for upward mobility, educational achievement is increasingly stratified by class. American higher education is increasingly the preserve of the elite. The sons and daughters of college-educated parents are more than twice as likely to go to college as the children of high school graduates and seven times as likely as those of high school dropouts. Only 5 percent of Americans ages 25 to 34 whose parents did not finish high school have a college degree. By comparison, the average across 20 rich countries in an analysis by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development is almost 20 percent. "Our public school system has proved no match to the forces reproducing inequality across the generations." (Porter 2015) A 'Hereditary Meritocracy' by the self-perpetuation of American elites, within the context of meritocratic systems, with children of elites are more likely to excel against ostensibly meritocratic standards when it comes to education and employment. The implied question is - how meritocratic are systems in which non-elites are clearly at a disadvantage? As the children of the rich and powerful are increasingly well suited to earning wealth and power themselves.

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13 James Fishkin's *Liberty Versus Equal Opportunity* is an example of a theoretical treatment of equality of opportunity. Fishkin argues that "merit", "equality of life chances", and "the autonomy of the family", cannot be simultaneously achieved (Fishkin 1987). Fishkin's "trilemma" is presented as a choice between extremes; it is most likely not the kind of treatment of the topic that practitioners and policymakers will be concerned with.

14 The calculation is made based on B. Milanovic (2013) 'All the Ginis Dataset (Updated June 2013)', http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTRESEARCH/0,,contentMDK:22301380~page PK:64214825~piPK:64214943~theSitePK:469382,00.html

15 Credit Suisse (2013) 'Global Wealth Report 2013', Zurich: Credit Suisse, https://publications.credit-suisse.com/tasks/render/file/?fileID=BCDB1364-A105-0560-1332EC9100FF5C83; and Forbes' 'The World's Billionaires', http://forbes.com/billionaires/list (accessed on 16 December 2013)

Helen Clark , UNDP Administrator and former Prime Minister of New Zealand speaking at an event.

▶ **Other considerations and critiques concerning meritocracy**

In meritocratic systems, the need remains for mechanisms that allow people to be held to account – a need for transparency and accountability. In remarks on "Modernizing Civil Services for the New Sustainable Development Agenda", UNDP Administrator Helen Clark remarked that "To promote transparency and accountability, checks and balances within institutions are needed. That includes empowering citizens to participate in public processes, including by monitoring service delivery. In an age of advanced information and communications technologies (ICTs), there are many new opportunities and tools for opening up spaces and channels for citizens to engage with the public authorities." (Clark 2015)

In thinking about meritocracy, "Wall Street versus Silicon Valley", checks and balances are still required to constrain the behavior of those who have succeeded in meritocratic systems (the harm caused by Wall Street bankers in recent years is the case in point) and that some meritocratic systems are better at holding their participants to account than others (Silicon Valley). "There is no prima facie reason to believe that those who have succeeded in a meritocracy will channel their energies to socially useful activities. Neither should there be a presumption that our legal and regulatory systems are always able to deter, anticipate, and punish the abuses and wrongdoings of the successful." (Low 2014, 54).

An additional consideration is the relationship between meritocracy and elitism. There are many angles from which this question can be viewed - one concerns the possibility of elitism emerging out of meritocracy (See e.g. Tan 2010). There is also the question of the degree to which meritocracy and elitism overlap.[16]

Meritocracy plus?

Challenges in creating good governance continue for countries at different stages of having implemented reform – from Weberian civil service reforms to new public management reforms to critiques of new public management. "And in countries that have not moved far down this particular path, reformers continue to search for ways to marry stability, predictability, and neutrality to good performance and accountability." (Grindle 2012, 262)

> *... in countries that have not moved far down this particular path, reformers search for ways to marry stability, predictability, and neutrality to good performance and accountability.*

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16 In a blogpost on meritocracy and elitism as they relate to good governance, Matt Andrews considers the example of "directors of South Africa's listed firms". Firstly, describing the general idea, Andrews notes that "Good governance, as many suggest, requires having principles of meritocracy that replace practices of elitism in key appointments, contracts etc. in governments and the private sector. The idea is to have authority in the hands of those who have the merit, which means that authority is not concentrated in the hands of the elite and is in fact located in a distributed group of agents who enjoy the skills and 'merit' to get the job done." (Andrews 2013) Andrews finds that almost ninety percent of directors had advanced degrees (an indicator of merit), while at the same time the group also reflects "elite" attributes. He writes that "In short, elites are often also the ones who claim points on meritocracy scales. They go to the best schools, get the most targeted degrees, enjoy opportunities to get lots of work experience, etc. And they often define what it means to have merit as well…."(Andrews 2013)

It bears repeating that the reforms a country undertakes need to take into account its particular circumstances/context. The question of sequencing of reforms – necessary preconditions for certain types of reforms pertains. What type of reform is appropriate for a country at a given time? What conditions must be in place? Context is also, of course, always changing over time, and many would argue that the demands of the 21st century require states to demonstrate new capabilities.[17]

Conclusion and questions for further research

Meritocracy is "essentially under-defined," (Sen 2000, 5) and that there are "varieties of meritocracy - some desirable, others possibly malignant" (Low 2014, 49). Much depends on how meritocracy is understood and how it is implemented. The practice of meritocracy is not monolithic and it can evolve over time; where challenges are identified, for example, the effect of growing inequality on a level playing field, measures can be taken to ameliorate those.

More research on meritocracy in different contexts from around the world could offer wider evidence about how the practice of meritocracy may change over time. What is still unclear is if there are any observable common stages that meritocracies pass through as they mature. It is, however, clear that a high level of meritocracy co-varies strongly with the quality of government, including low corruption and how efficiently state resources are used.

Michael Young, whose book "The Rise of the Meritocracy" first coined the term, in 1978, twenty years after he invented the word to warn of its dangers, was appointed to the unrepresentative, unelected elitist upper house of parliament in the UK, the House of Lords. There he brought his world class expertise to bear on improving policy issues of his time. That ironic example illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the meritocratic system.

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17 For example, "There is growing recognition in the scholarly community that many contemporary public policy problems are complex, relentless (i.e. not amenable to time-bound solutions) and contested (Bourgon, 2011). There are sometimes defined as wicked problems which cannot be addressed through single interventions and technical fixes administered by individual public agencies working alone." (Robinson 2015, 12)

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