
Guest editorial: Rethinking the state of the administrative state: Is the state back in?

Guest editorial

373

Introduction

The emergence and the frequency of what may be described as monumental crises, such as devastating hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes and the COVID-19 pandemic, their impact on human health and economic development and the need to forcefully address them have brought forth or resurrected the idea of the administrative state and its role in governance as broadly defined once again (Lin *et al.*, 2020). Due to the prodigious crises that society is facing, there has been a call for the state to rebuild its capacity to enable it to mitigate the effects of such crises (Boin and Lodge, 2016; Holzer and Newbold, 2020; Lewis, 2019).

Prior to this, the administrative state had continually been demonized as ineffective, inefficient, incompetent, etc. to the extent that some even had earlier called for its dismantling (Barzelay, 1992; Osborne and Plastrick, 1997; Lobao *et al.*, 2018; Wallison, 2018). This call led to what many scholars have described as the “hollowing out” of the state as a result of policies developed to curtail “the strong arm of the state”, which was described as being too congested and overloaded with policymaking and implementation (Rhodes, 2017; Skelcher, 2000). In general, the “hollowing-out” idea led to what Hood (1991) has described as the New Public Management (NPM), with its emphasis on new ways of managing the administrative state. A significant aspect of this was the introduction of an entrepreneurial spirit and increased focus on efficiency and market factors. The administrative state was thus to imitate the private sector in how the latter delivered services (Lapuente and Van de Walle, 2020; Minogue, 2001; Pollitt, 1993).

The policies implemented in the name of the NPM led to the erosion of the institutions of the administrative state through policies that sought to cut social programmes and public sector jobs, through the sale of public assets and privatization (Cordelli, 2020), along with a more general weakening of regulation and the underfunding of public infrastructures, particularly healthcare and emergency management systems (Hood and Scott, 1996; Tomic and Heims, 2022).

In general, the state’s role in governance shifted dramatically due to actions taken by governments until the COVID-19 pandemic hit. This was in spite of the gradual reassertion of the state in governance, with the notion of collaborative governance, due to the limited success of policies implemented in the name of the NPM (Hood and Dixon, 2015). With the significant role of the state in managing the pandemic, one may ask the following questions: is the state now back in or just a temporal truce? To what extent has the emperor re-emerged with new clothes? What is the nature of the clothes the emperor is wearing? These questions will be answered in the context of the role of the state in addressing wicked problems (Head, 2022; Peters, 2017) that continue to engulf the state globally.

Indeed, we now see a significant call for the state in dealing with these unsurmountable crises. For example, in Canada, there are now growing demands for the federal government [as well as provincial and municipal governments] to develop a universal basic income policy as a response to the inadequacies of the existing unemployment insurance and other welfare programs. Similarly, in developing countries, the lack of effective social welfare regimes continues to be exposed by the pandemic. It is not surprising, therefore, that governments in these countries are struggling to effectively address the socioeconomic problems that have risen due to the pandemic (Foli and Ohemeng, 2022).



In a report titled: *Transition Report, 2020–2021: The State strikes back*, the [European Bank for Reconstruction and Development \(EBRD\) \(2021\)](#) notes how there is a growing trend of the acceptance of state involvement in national development and the increased expectations that are now being placed on it. The report indicates that

Today, there is a sense that the state is striking back. And that was true even before the arrival of COVID-19. In advanced economies, more firms were nationalized than privatized in the early years of the 21st century, while economies where state ownership is widespread, such as China and Singapore, have experienced exceptional rates of economic growth. Household surveys reveal significant and rising support for the expansion of state ownership, perhaps as a reflection of rising inequality and the scars of the global financial crisis of 2008–09 (12).

The report goes on to say that the expansion of the state's role in the economy currently takes different forms, including increased government spending on goods, services, regulation and transfers, and an increasingly important role as an employer and provider of goods and services.

The ability of the state to deliver on citizens' expectations in response to wicked problems ([Head, 2022](#); [Peters, 2017](#)), including the current COVID-19 pandemic, seems to indicate that the state is back in. The governance capacity of the administrative state is important for furthering governance legitimacy ([Christensen et al., 2016](#)). We have seen the inability of the market to rise to such occasions, including the current pandemic, with the private sector, literally begging for public assistances both in the financial and health sectors ([Stiglitz, 2021](#); [Williams, 2020](#)). This begging is not necessarily new, as we witnessed what happened during the late 2000s financial crisis where private entities were even described as "too big to fail", which led to massive bailouts through state intervention in financial markets around the world ([Morrison, 2011](#)).

Looking at the prevailing environment, one may ask the following questions: is the state back in, if we accept that this is the case so far, after years of retrenchment and the last few years of deconstructing and reconstructing the state? Has the administrative state really been out of fashion and what are the signs that it is back in fashion? Is what happening now a temporary revival of the administrative state? What sort of administrative state should we expect in the future, especially in the post-COVID 19 world? What sort of accountability regime could the "new" administrative state develop? What could be the relationship between political and administrative leaders in the "new" administrative state?

This special issue on the administrative state attempts to answer these questions. However, it will be extremely difficult and, perhaps, naïve to answer all these questions in a short introductory essay (editorial). Consequently, the essence of this essay is to understand the administrative state and the various trajectories it has gone through up to now. The idea is not necessarily to provide a more detailed analysis of these trajectories, but rather an attempt to provide a careful summary of some of these events, which will enable readers to see where the administrative state is at this critical moment of human development. From this perspective, we hope that this essay will be able to answer the first two questions, with the rest of the papers in this special issue, addressing the other questions. In addition, we hope that the discussions here will lead to further dialogue about the administrative state by scholars interested in the role of state in development in the future.

It must be said that this special issue goes beyond what most current special issues have focused on, i.e. beyond the debate about whether and how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the role of the state at all levels of government. Thus, while it is clear that the state's role in almost all nations has continued to experience dramatic shifts, especially in dealing with wicked problems, the need to understand this dramatic shift from a more general perspective continues to be obscured in the current discussion. Thus, as argued, there is the need to look at the role of the administrative state in a more holistic perspective rather than

the current obsession to examine it mainly from how the state has evolved under the COVID-19 pandemic. This general perspective is necessary since the administrative state had gained traction in terms of governance before the pandemic struck. In all, we are not dismissing the important role of the COVID-19 pandemic in exposing the dilemma of the neoliberal ideas of shrinking the state through more frame steering and less interference in the “rowing”, but a big picture, in our view, is needed to understand what has been going on over the years and in more recent times.

We begin this introductory essay by providing a brief understanding of the idea of the administrative state and its emergency as part of the lexicon of public administration. This is necessary since the idea continues to be used differently, and how it has come to be symbolized in modern times in different fields of study. We follow this with some discussion on how the administrative state was “demonized” with the rise of neoliberalism from the mid-1970s. We then look at the gradual evolution or rebirth of the administrative state in recent times. This will then lead us to the next section which attempts to effectively answer the main research question of whether the administrative state is back in. Here, we will look at the various papers that make up the special issue and how the authors have shown the important role of what may be described as modern governance.

The administrative state and its emergence

While the notion of the administrative state has been in existence for quite a long time (Dudley, 2021; Lewis, 2021), its modern usage is attributed to Dwight Waldo in a 1948 book with the title the administrative state (Waldo, 1948; Roberts, 2020). But what exactly is the administrative state? The essence of defining the concept is important here since “scholarly understandings of the administrative state have become confused over the past 80 years. Today, academics often use this single label to refer to several distinct phenomena. This muddles the analysis (Roberts, 2020, p. 392). This is not far from the truth from both academic and practical points of view. For instance, when many right-wing politicians and even some academics, in particular, those from the legal fraternity use the concept, they generally refer to “the regulation or regulatory works,” of the state, rather than the general administrative machinery that many, especially those from public administration, use the concept.

This narrow view was what Steve Bannon and other Trumps acolytes had in mind when they talked about “deconstructing” the administrative state (Nielson, 2021; Lewis, 2021). Nevertheless, it must be said that this narrow focus on what is the administrative state is not new. For example, learning from both the Thatcher and Reagan revolutions in the late 1970s and early 1980s and trying to put a stamp on Ontario’s economy in the 1990s, the new elected premier, Mike Harris, noted that Ontarians were perhaps the most governed (in terms of government regulations) people in the world (Ohemeng, 2005). This narrow notion of the administrative state allows politicians to reduce what they considered many uncalled-for regulations and what they perceive as bureaucratic red tape, deconstructing the state and thus reducing the size of government bureaucracy (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2019). To these politicians, therefore, “the administrative state [was] inherently dysfunctional, oppressive and conflict engendering” (Abel and Sementelli, 2002, p. 254), which should be tamed, or if it could not, be banished completely in the management of a country (DeMuth, 2016; Gormley, 2014; Osborne and Plastrick, 1997).

The administrative state, however, is more than developing regulations. In this sense, it takes on a broader meaning, and it is this perspective that we follow here. In this sense, the administrative state comprises the entirety of the public sector. It thus denotes the range of public service institutions in the service to the nation. It is, therefore, a large bureaucracy empowered with significant governing authority. This perspective is shared by Roberts (2020), who sees the administrative state as the public bureaucracy that works for the public

executive at the federal, state and local government levels. [Wilson and Dwivedi \(1982\)](#) in their study defined the concept as the phenomenon by which state institutions influence many aspects of the lives of citizens, especially those aspects which relate to the economic and social dimensions. It describes a system of governance through which public policies and programs, affecting almost all aspects of public life, are influenced by the decisions of public officials. In this sense, we can see that the domain of the administrative state is vast, ranging from the most trivial to the most significant matters of public and private life.

In most countries, the administrative state fully emerged after the Great Depression of the 1930s. For example, in the USA, this led to the development of what the literature has described as the New Deal policy. This policy reflected new ambitious and activities, which greatly enlarged the national government through the establishment of a number of different institutions to cater for the growing complexities of the country ([Strauss, 2021](#); [Tushnet, 2021](#)). Similarly, in Canada, the period marked a major expansion of the state, which was characterized by the accelerated rate of growth in the size, complexity and influence of the public service ([Kernaghan, n.d.](#)). In Europe, the administrative state emerged differently in different countries. For instance, there is a distinction between Germanic, Napoleonic and other administrative traditions that have had influence in the development of the administrative state in continental Europe ([Peters, 2021](#); [Painter and Peters, 2010](#)). Be that as it may, by the end of the First World War, most European societies had built the administrative state based on the Weberian notion. The emergence of Keynesianism after the war further emphasized the significant role of the administrative state in Europe ([Klooster, 2021](#)).

In many developing countries, the administrative state emerged after the Second World War and the decolonization process. With the agitation for independence reaching a feverish height, the colonial authorities had no choice but to introduce effective administrative machinery to help countries that were about to be granted independence ([Haque, 1996](#)). The belief was that the effective public administration system based on strong, efficient and effective administrative institutions would lift these countries from the state of underdevelopment to development based on the Western conceptualization or model of the role of the state in economic and political development.

Achieving independence, however, did not solve these countries' problems. The government machinery, particularly the bureaucracy, was inadequate and faced tasks it had not been set up to perform. Creating an effective governmental system, with an efficient and capable bureaucracy that could meet these developmental needs, then became paramount. Consequently, most developing countries saw what scholars have described as development administration. Development administration thus emerged out of the realization that governments and their bureaucracies in less-developed countries needed to be recreated and revitalized as a prerequisite for transforming those societies with the focus on how to build administrative bureaucracies in these countries ([Gant, 2006](#); [Hope, 1984](#); [Luke, 1986](#); [Schaffer, 1969](#)).

The key structural features of the administrative state include delegation of discretionary authority from democratic representatives to the executive branch. This extended discretionary authority leads to the granting of formal bureaucratic independence to some agencies, called agencification, through insulation of agency officials from complete executive control. Yet, this independence is not a full one as bureaucrats and politicians are supposed to work in tandem for the betterment of society ([Sossin, 2005](#)). An important aspect of this independence is not a pure separation or dichotomy of policy and administration, but rather a mutual understanding of the limits of discretion between policy actors, in particular, policy developers and policy implementers. This is necessary since an effective bureaucracy in a representative democracy is seen as an important balancing act between responsiveness to electoral results and more objective policy outcomes on policy

consistencies (Fogarty, 2018). In so doing, governments would be able to respond to the will of the people, a foundational principle of representative democracy.

Beermann (2018) in his insightful discussion of the administrative state in the USA sees the importance of this independence as part of the combination of executive, quasi-legislative and quasi-judicial functions within single agencies. According to him, administrative authority lies at the foundation of effective governance of society. For example, the ability of agencies to inspect the premises of regulated entities and to require them to provide information to regulators, the adjudication of regulatory disputes within administrative agencies and deferential judicial review of agency action are all important aspects of the independence which administrative agencies and institutions need to carry on the requirements of the citizens through their representatives.

Unfortunately, it is this autonomy, as well as regulatory powers of administrative institutions that continue to be challenged by those who believe that such powers have allowed the administrative state to intrude in individual affairs, which goes against the tenets of democracy. To those who continue to argue this way, it is time to rein in the overstretched arm of the administrative state to allow more freedom for individual ingenuity. Hence, the need to reconstruct the administrative state and set up limits within which states institutions should function (Nielson, 2021).

Continuous attempts to deconstruct the administrative state

There is a large body of literature that has addressed the crucifixion and deconstruction of the administrative state. Prior to the launching of the current attempts to deconstruct the administrative state, neoliberal politicians had charged the administrative state with an array of “crimes”, such as failure to perform; abuse of power; repression of employees, clients and people in general and being muddled, confused, expensive, unresponsive, bloated and self-destructive to the extent that it is now seen as a “splendid hate object” that must be reformed or even destroyed (Goodsell, 1983; Caiden, 1991; Peters and Savoie, 1996). Neoliberals were of the view that the problems faced by the modern state in the late 1960s and early 1970s were the product of the state’s expansion of its activities. They claimed that “if government was not the root of all evil, it certainly was more part of the problem than the solution” (Stiglitz, 2003, p. 85). In view of these criticisms, there were calls from some quarters to banish or tame the administrative state (Osborne and Plastrick, 1997). The assault on the administrative state has continued with the emergence of more right-wing politicians in national governance. These politicians and leaders continue to show their distaste of the administrative state with significant bureaucrat bashing. For example, before even launching his campaign, Trump (2015) offered his hostility toward the administrative state, tweeting that “bureaucratic red tape and overregulation are discouraging the American dream.” Trump continued this hostility with campaign promises of deregulation, elimination of administrative barriers to business interests and promises to deconstruct the administrative state (Rutledge, 2020). These anti-bureaucracy ideologies are an important part of the modern history of the administrative state, but they operate in a larger political system defined by strong institutional incentives and long-term political dynamics (e.g. polarization and insecure majorities) that contribute independently to an ongoing deconstruction of the administrative state (see also Kettl, 2017).

The rebirth of the [Neo]-administrative state

In the last few years, scholars interested in the bureaucracy have forcefully argued that despite the rhetoric espoused by those who abhor bureaucracy, the institution continues to persist. However, scholars have indicated that if the traditional administrative state was the

full projection of the Weberian bureaucracy, the early 2000s saw the rebirth of the administrative state with a new form of bureaucracy. This new administrative state stands in opposition to and is a reaction to NPM, based on neoliberal principles, and draws on the achievements of traditional public administration (TPA) also known as the Weberian bureaucracy (Biatynicki-Birula *et al.*, 2017). It is a combination of the elements of TPA and the NPM, therefore the often used label post-NPM (Christensen and Læg Reid, 2010).

Scholars have described these Siamese twins as the “neo-administrative state” (Durant, 2000, 2010) or the “neo-Weberian state” (du Gay *et al.*, 2017; Lynn, 2008; Randma-Liiv, 2011; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011, 2017; Ramos and Milanese, 2020). As well illustrated in the illuminative analysis by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011), the neo-Weberian state with its accompanying bureaucratic institutions exhibits the following characteristics (Table 1).

“Weberian” elements	“Neo” elements
Reaffirmation of the role of the state as the main facilitator of solutions to the new problems of globalization, technological change, shifting demographics and environmental threat	Shift from an internal orientation towards bureaucratic rules towards an external orientation towards meeting citizens’ needs and wishes. The primary route to achieving this is not the employment of market mechanisms (although they may occasionally come in handy) but the creation of a professional culture of quality and service
Reaffirmation of the role of representative democracy (central, regional and local) as the legitimating element within the state apparatus	Supplementation (not replacement) of the role of representative democracy by a range of devices for consultation with and the direct representation of citizens’ views (this aspect being more visible in the northern European states and Germany at the local level than in Belgium, France, or Italy)
Reaffirmation of the role of administrative law – suitably modernized – in pre-serving the basic principles pertaining to the citizen–state relationship, including equality before the law, legal security and the availability of specialized legal scrutiny of state actions	In the management of resources within government, a modernization of the relevant laws to encourage a greater orientation on the achievement of results rather than merely the correct following of procedure. This is expressed partly in a shift in the balance from <i>ex ante</i> to ex-post controls, but not a complete abandonment of the former
Preservation of the idea of a public service with a distinctive status, culture and terms and conditions	A professionalization of the public service, so that the “bureaucrat” becomes not simply an expert in the law relevant to his or her sphere of activity but also a professional manager, oriented to meeting the needs of his/her citizen/users

Source(s): Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011, pp. 118–119)

Table 1.
Elements of the Neo-Weberian state

Under the neo-Weberian state, administrative reformers’ political strategy was the promotion of public sector modernization that enhances the ability of administrative institutions to steer, as well as coordinate institutional capacities with the aim to rebuild the state’s central role in leading economic growth and social cohesiveness. In this case, the sense of rowing and steering under the NPM was discarded since it had been shown as not the best way of doing things, especially in democratic societies (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000). Similarly, there was the notion of “bringing the owners of public services,” i.e. citizens into the equation in the form of collaboration in what many scholars have described as co-production and co-delivery. Indeed, it was believed that the neo-Weberian state had resurrected a different state or bureaucratic structures for modern governance. Many believed that the idea had resulted into a mixture of hierarchy, networking and collaboration among different institutions, including the private for-profit and non-profit sectors. Unfortunately, this mixture, especially the role of non-state actors, has also brought forth the question of inclusivity, accountability and democratic norms, which needs to be well addressed. The idea of inclusivity by all bureaucrats and citizens, especially in diverse society, has become essential as a way of hearing different voices to resolve wicked problems (Peters, 2017).

Another facet of the neo-Weberian state is the focus of the notion of governance. Governance is a concept that seems to encompass everything. As a result, its meaning seems to have lost significance, which has led to what some scholars have described as concept stretching. Thus, its meaning continues to be lost due to its ubiquitous nature (Van Kersbergen and Van Waarden, 2004). Dimitrova (2020) is of the view that the diversity in disciplinary approaches, which the concept finds itself in, is a source of confusion, although according to her, this can equally lead to productive inter- and trans-disciplinary exchanges to capture the many facets of governance.

The literature on governance is voluminous. One thing is certain though. There seems to be a consensus that there are different forms of governance. These forms of governance have emerged from how the idea has been examined from the perspective of different disciplinary lenses. In relation to the administrative state, however, the focus on governance is more on what has been described as collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash, 2007; Bingham, 2009; Freeman, 1997), although defining collaborative governance has become quite fuzzy (Batory and Svensson, 2019). Ansell and Gash (2007, p. 544) define the concept as “a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets”. In a nutshell, collaborative governance stems from the perspective that the administrative state has limited capacity to comprehensively address the needs or wicked problems of society on its own. Consequently, the administrative state needs to join forces with citizens (not-for profit sector) and the private for-profit sectors in order to address societal problems effectively. Ansell and Gash (2007, p. 543) have summarized this mode of governance as the idea of bringing “multiple stakeholders together in common forums with public agencies to engage in consensus-oriented decision making”.

However, it is not only in decision-making that we find such collaborative governance. Some scholars believe that the administrative state should engage these stakeholders both in policy design, management and implementation of public programs. Furthermore, others believe that to effectively hold the administrative state accountable demands such collaborative approach to governance (Sorensen and Torfing, 2021). In all, the idea of collaborative and other forms of governance continues the assault on the administrative state, perhaps in a more subtle form. This is because the idea continues to see the administrative state as incapable of doing what it is supposed to do and therefore needs help from the different sectors of the economy. In so doing, the administrative state is seen with suspicious eye with a check on what it can do and cannot do.

Is the administrative state back in?

Looking around and beginning with the financial crisis of the late 2000s, the many catastrophic events, which have been described as wicked problems, the current COVID-19 pandemic, which has devastated many economies, the role played by the public sector, including the various measures to resolve these issues, and the prominence of bureaucratic institutions and leadership, one may ask the following questions: is the administrative back in? Or simply put, are we witnessing a shift back to Keynesianism, where the state played a significant role in development? The initial reaction to such a question may be yes, but is that really the case? If so, what sort of administrative state is back in?

In a recent analysis of the role of the administrative state in development, Evans and Heller (2018) were emphatic about the role of the administrative state in addressing many seemingly unsurmountable problems facing society. They noted that the crises facing the state have raised more general questions about government performance, the agility to adjust to rapidly changing circumstances and the oversight of decision-making. Most governments have proven that they can consider, act and collaborate quickly, navigating difficult decisions

and making resources available at great speed. Bureaucratic and administrative processes have been streamlined and changed – even where there were long-standing impediments – almost (or sometimes literally) overnight. Sometimes new laws or regulations were needed for these changes to happen, along with willpower and intent from leadership; in other times, change was self-sustaining because of the contextual needs.

In a more recent analysis, the renowned Economist, Joseph [Stiglitz \(2021\)](#) has emphasized what he describes as the proper role of government [*administrative state-emphasis ours*] in the economy in a post-COVID world. He is of the view that if states are to restore robust economic growth, then it is imperative to note that market forces alone are inadequate to resolve the various issues at hand and that governments must step up to fill this void and play a key role in recovery. He goes on to identify a number of ways in which the administrative state should continue to play.

[Stiglitz's \(2021\)](#) enlightened discussion, as well as many others (see for example, [Roberts, 2020](#)) has brought forth the important role of the state in development and the question of whether the state is back in. Indeed, looking at the role of the state during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as many serious crises before it, there is no doubt in anyone's mind on the importance of the administrative state in dealing with wicked problems ([Amoah, 2021](#); [Balz, 2020](#); [Holzer and Newbold, 2020](#); [Jones and Hameiri, 2021](#); [Kumar, 2021](#)). Thus, we agree with [Evans and Heller \(2018\)](#) that the developmental value of competent, coherent state apparatuses remains undeniable and the ability to preserve such states and create them where they do not yet exist should be a prime determinant of the world's future path. This is because governments, all over the world, have clearly been a fundamental part of the response to the crisis, highlighting the essential role of the public sector in providing a safety net for citizens and ensuring the continued running of basic services. This also relates to the central position of the state with its varied roles as rule maker, signaller, convenor and facilitator with regard to mobilising or unlocking the contributions of other parts of society, especially in difficult times. So, how is the state back in? As already noted, this is the fundamental question that this special issue attempts to answer with the various papers assembled.

Before proceeding to discuss the papers in this special issue, it is important to provide the context of the special issue. With the seemingly collapse of the market and the call for a strong role of the administrative state at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the guest editors in collaboration with the editor-in-chief of the *International Journal of Public Sector Management* decided to explore how the administrative state has been performing in the context of the crisis. The idea to focus on the administrative state stemmed from the notion that while there have been many special issues on the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe there will be more of such special issues in the future, and few seems to have looked at the role of the administrative state in meeting the challenges faced by citizens in the midst of severe market failure, especially from public administration and management perspectives. It is within this milieu that the call for papers was issued. We received 24 abstracts, and after a careful review, 16 of them were developed into fully fledged papers. Of this, 14 met the deadline of submitting full papers for peer review. Seven papers were rejected through the peer review process, with the other seven being accepted. These constitute the papers in this special issue.

The first paper by [Vining et al. \(2022\)](#) addresses what the authors describe as the social value of commercial enterprises that are jointly owned by a government and private sector investors. While not explicitly focusing on the return of the state in development, the paper highlights the importance role of the state in public–private hybrid enterprises. The paper, therefore, complements the ideas of the state in economic development as advocated by [Stiglitz \(2022\)](#).

Following this is a paper by [Bancerz \(2022\)](#), which examines the role of the state in food policymaking. The United Nations recently warned about food shortages in many parts of the world and urged states to take measures to address what it described as an alarming situation

to avoid serious catastrophe in the near future. The question then is what role should the state play in averting such a catastrophe? Bancerz's paper attempts to contribute to the discussion of the role of the state in food policy. The paper highlights the role of the state in food policy in two ways: as a "conductor," playing a managing role in the food policy process, and as a "commander," taking control of policy development and involving nonstate actors when necessary. In her view, the complex and wicked aspects of food policy require the administrative state's involvement in food policymaking, while tamer aspects of food policy may be less state-centric. It is believed that the importance of the role of the state may therefore help avert the looming catastrophe that the United Nations is worried about.

The paper by [Wong et al. \(2022\)](#), *Strong government responses? Reflections on the management of COVID-19 in Hong Kong and Taiwan*, reflects on the role of the state in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors are of the view that both countries have received praise in their efforts to combat the raging pandemic due to the "attempt to establish strong stewardship and quick measures to contain the infection" despite approaching the notion of "strong government" from two different perspectives and the impartiality of law enforcement. Be that as it may, both states used their administrative capacities in developing policies and measures in fighting the pandemic.

As already discussed, the reconstruction of the administrative state under the NPM focused on what [Cordelli \(2020\)](#) has described as the privatized state, which generally deals with the increasing contracting out of public services to private corporations. However, privatized states, according to [Cordelli \(2020\)](#), cannot govern legitimately (see also [Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000](#)). The privatization (defined in broader terms) has not resulted in the "taming" of the administrative state, leading to a reversal of privatization ([Hefetz and Warner, 2004](#); [Huang et al., 2021](#)). It is this reversal or what may be considered the failure of privatization that the paper by Hung and Lu examine. Conducting a systematic review of existing literature on contracting back-in with a focus on the scope and rationale of contracting back-in, the authors show that reversing contracting is driven by a mix of managerial, political and environmental factors. The rise of contracting back-in, therefore, implies a revival of the administrative state in public governance and a more dynamic, potentially more complicated, system of public service delivery.

An important role of the administrative state in addressing wicked problems centres on the calibre of human resources in administrative institutions. The calibre of administrative personnel, especially in the executive class, depends on the appointments made by elected officials. Thus, in the USA for example, one of the criticisms levelled against the Trump administration's COVID-pandemic measures was the failure to fill in administrative personnel and, in most cases, competent personnel as well ([Balz, 2020](#)). Thus, administrative (competent) appointments are vital for the successful role of the state in addressing wicked problems. It is based on this idea that the paper by [Brock and Shepherd \(2022\)](#) examines the current Canadian government's governor-in-council (GIC) appointment processes to examine whether the approach leads to appointments based on merit, a criterion of bringing in competent bureaucratic personnel to the administrative state. The authors are of the view that although the new GIC process seems to focus on merit, in actuality, the new arrangements do not deliver on merit-based criteria that ensure that the independence of bureaucratic personnel and institutions are protected between political executive and senior bureaucratic officials. They note that while the new processes may be more open and transparent than past processes, such processes are more susceptible to partisan influence under the guise of being merit-based and wonder if this innovation of merit-based appointments in the new administrative state is obscuring the lines of accountability and whether it forms the basis for good policy advice despite promises to the contrary. Thus, the need to have an enhanced process of bureaucratic appointment is seen as a sine-quo-non for an effective administrative state.

One of the important facets of building the capacity of the administrative state is education. This is the focus of the paper by Francesca Constanza (2022). The author looks at how the COVID-19 pandemic has been the harbinger of exacerbating pre-existing inequalities and social issues in society, while at the same time accelerating innovation and digital transformation. According to her, these tendencies can be found in the education sector. To her, the importance of focusing on education is that quality education is among the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, as an enabler of socioeconomic mobility. How then can this goal be realized? The answer, according to her, lies in the role of street-level bureaucrats developing and triggering co-creative processes that will enhance the development of policies and enhanced environment of learning, in particular distance learning, if no one is to be left behind, so to speak. Thus, the managerial and professional competencies of bureaucrats are necessary to ensure effective education. The state must, therefore, focus on building the capacity of its employees to ensure effective policy development and the efficient delivery of public services, she notes.

The last paper in this special issue is by Himanshu (2022). This paper is interesting as it is the only one that focuses on a developing country. The author examines the administrative role of the Indian state in its management of the COVID-19 pandemic. The author boldly declares that the role of the Indian state in fighting the pandemic shows the resurfacing of a strong administrative entity in the context of public management of the pandemic, after years of neoliberal state reforms. He, however, cautions that the re-emerged administrative state needs to maintain a judicious balance between learning, puzzling and empowering in modern society if it is to manage effectively management in addressing societal wicked problems.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the above discussion, the trajectories of the administrative state have been what may be described as up and down. The obsession in the last four decades to alter the trajectories of the administrative state, especially its role in development (policy, regulatory and implementation), continues to be a concern for both opponents and proponents of the administrative state. However, the recent notion of reconstructing the administrative state through the minimalist approaches has unearthed the folly in the attempt to tame the administrative state (Balz, 2020; Cordelli, 2020; Kettl, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us the importance of the administrative state in addressing wicked problem. Nevertheless, the critical questions are whether the administrative state is fully back in and to what extent? Have we seen a shift back to Keynesianism or the administrative state is still hobbling on one leg? Time will tell. Despite this, the various papers assembled in this special issue say one thing: the important role of the administrative state in managing societal needs cannot be underestimated.

Frank L.K. Ohemeng

Department of Political Science, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, and

Tom Christensen

Department of Political Science, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

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