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## Interview

# The Institutional: A Conversation with Hugh Heclo

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*This interview marks the 30th anniversary of the publication of Hugh Heclo's classic, A Government of Strangers: Executive Politics in Washington. This engaging conversation touches on such wide-ranging themes as Heclo's early mentorship by Aaron Wildavsky; his nurturing apprenticeship at the Brookings Institution, leading to the publication of A Government of Strangers; the increasingly intense partisanship and schism within the executive branch between career federal bureaucrats and political appointees; the conduct of presidential administrations as never-ending political marketing campaigns; the cynical harnessing of religion in the service of policy objectives; public service and institutional commitment; and the need for political leadership to engage the public honestly and responsibly on matters of fiscal concern.*

**PAR:** Before we talk about your scholarship, tell us about how you became interested in government and politics.

**Heclo:** I think it started in the late 1950s, when my mom and I moved to Washington from a small town in Ohio. While I floundered in the Arlington [Virginia] high school system, she worked as a clerical secretary in the federal bureaucracy downtown and then in a congressman's office. I think it was the political grandeur of D.C.—the sheer historical monumentalism of the place—that first drew me in. I tried and failed to get into the congressional page program, but then there immediately came the excitement of the 1960 election and the idealism and glamour of the Kennedy administration. I enrolled at George Washington University in 1961, living in a dorm three blocks from the White House, and it just seemed that things political were what really mattered. It was D.C. as a place and the excitement of the times that got me interested in government and politics. I suppose it was as irrational, or nonrational, as that.

**PAR:** It has been 30 years since *A Government of Strangers* was published; tell us a little bit about how you came to write that book.

**Heclo:** It happened in a very roundabout way. I wrote my PhD dissertation at Yale on the political creation of the British and Swedish welfare states, and in doing my field research, I became enamored with the idea of living in England. So in 1971, that's where I took my first teaching job, at Essex University, getting married in London and living in a five-story walkup apartment just two blocks from Whitehall.

By sheer coincidence, Aaron Wildavsky was on leave that same year studying budgeting in Britain. Somehow he got my name and asked whether I would like to help him do some interviews. The cabinet secretary, Sir William Armstrong, had provided him great access, but I gathered that Aaron's brusque, no-nonsense Bronx style was not going down very well with some of Whitehall's genteel civil servants. So he would interview political bigwigs like the cabinet secretaries, and I would interview the permanent secretaries and other civil servants. Aaron was a wonderful mentor and insisted on absolute equality in our research and writing relationship, so we ended up as coauthors of a book called *The Private Government of Public Money*.

In the middle of this process, I saw an ad in a professional journal announcing a Brookings Institution essay contest as part of their project on presidential selection. I wrote an essay comparing presidential and prime ministerial selection that caught their eye and eventually landed a job there as a research associate. So there I was, back in D.C. The amazing thing is that when I asked what project they wanted me to work on, the answer was, in effect, "You tell us." My bosses, Gilbert Steiner and Kermit Gordon [director of government studies and president of the Brookings Institution, respectively], set the tone. It was about intellectual seriousness, integrity, and unpretentiousness. They more or less said, "since we've decided you're a person worth hiring, we trust that you'll come up with some project that has intellectual merit and hopefully will be of some use to the larger public."

Because I had just spent almost two years talking and writing about how Whitehall worked, it was a

no-brainer to think of trying to do the same in Washington. So my idea was to study how, in real life, political agendas get translated into public policies in the executive branch. Senior people in the government studies program at Brookings, people like Herb Kaufman, Jim Sundquist, Dick Nathan, Steve Hess, and Martha Derthick, treated me like an equal colleague and selflessly helped me polish the proposal. Then, Gordon and Steiner shepherded my project through Brookings' board of directors. There was never a question about partisan sensitivities or where to raise research funds. The truth is that sometimes there really is a golden age in the life of an organization, and I was fortunate enough to find myself in the middle of one at Brookings.

So that's how *A Government of Strangers* came to be. I apologize for going on, but thanks for letting me do so. Maybe it will help some younger readers, who mistakenly think you have to plan out a sharply defined career line and research agenda or else risk total failure. As far as I can tell, life really doesn't work that way. Asked why you made this or that big commitment, it turns out to be a complicated, unplanned series of things that seems to work out when you use your mind to follow what is in your heart rather than become distracted by what everyone else is telling you to do. In retrospect, it might look coherent, but at the time, it was really a shaggy dog story.

**PAR:** Tell us a bit about the interviews that you did for the book.

**Hecló:** It was 1973, and Nixon had just been reelected by a landslide. The White House made it clear there was going to be a big-time reorganization. Loyalty and toughness were the order of the day, and there was a lot of ferment in the air about bringing the bureaucracy under control. I tried to use the folkways of Washington—that is, the reputation of individuals and networks around Washington—not to study Nixon's reorganization but the working world of executive politics in which this or any other effort at presidential leadership was embedded.

I used the method that had worked in London. Government officials were far more secretive there. In Washington, the problem wasn't so much getting people to talk but finding people who were worth talking to, somehow cutting through the blatant self-promotion. So rather than begin by interviewing people currently in office, I talked with people, civil servants, and political appointees who were retired or otherwise out of office but who had had a lot of experience in the executive branch. Once our interviews convinced them I was serious—not a partisan or some academic theoretician—they would usually suggest other savvy people currently in office I could talk to. I exploited that personal entrée for all it was worth in

the various departments and agencies. Eventually, I came up with about 200 usable interviews.

**PAR:** In the book, you analyze the often conflictual relationships between career civil servants and presidential appointees. Why is that dynamic important for the U.S. government?

**Hecló:** Well, I'm sure you know the answer, probably better than I do, but I'll put it on the record.

The relationship between political executives and the bureaucracy is important in any democracy, but in the United States, it is especially problematic due to the way our government is structured, with politically separated legislative and executive branches. The political/careerist relationship is important because this is where the second great gearing mechanism of government operates, for better or worse. Of course, the first such gearing mechanism is between the people and their elected representatives. That's the primary, necessary condition for self-government, but it isn't by any means sufficient. Nothing worthwhile will happen unless the gears being powered by the popular mandate engage the bureaucratic system. Max Weber was right: You don't do anything in the modern world without bureaucracy. This is where the vision of democratic popular control and the reality of administration meet up. And the gearing can transmit force in both directions, from political leadership to bureaucratic leadership and vice versa. I wanted to talk to people who were on both sides of that relationship—the president's people and the bureaucracy's people. Their two perspectives are in some tension with each other. I wanted to see why this relationship works well for some people and not others, and in fact, what "working well" even means.

**PAR:** What developments in the intervening 30 years have affected that crucial relationship? Are things noticeably better or worse than they were 30 years ago? If you were to write that book in 2007, what questions would you ask and what issues would you address?

**Hecló:** The partisanship was intense in 1973–75, while I was doing most of my interviewing. But today, the general climate of conflict and distrust has intensified to a degree that I couldn't have imagined then. President Nixon was highly partisan but not particularly ideological, unless you count paranoia as an ideology, and neither were his people. He was a pragmatist who wanted to get things done and was much more interested in international affairs than domestic policy. There really wasn't much of a conservative movement, women's movement, religious right, environmental movement, etc., to deal with.

Today, there are not only more political appointees but also a lot more ideological ties to outside policy advocacy groups. Redoing the book, I'd have to ask more questions about these ties to executive politics.

Also, at the top of the career ranks, it would be harder, if not impossible, to find people as broadly experienced as those I talked with in the early 1970s. I interviewed folks who had known people in every White House going back to Herbert Hoover. There were career civil servants who had actually helped design the Social Security program, the Marshall Plan, the administrative structures to deal with the beginning of the Cold War, the interstate highway system, and the space program. I don't think you could find career people today with such high-level experience. Many of the civil servants I met with had a real sense of institutional continuity and integrity in government. Maybe it's part of this "greatest generation" phenomenon, but they could see themselves as public servants. I think that attitude has become a diminishing and unfortunately rare quality of executive life in Washington. There were places—the Social Security Administration, the Office of Management and Budget, the Labor Department, even the first years of the Congressional Budget Office—that did serious, nonpartisan research regardless of political party or ideology. Today, there is a pervasive preoccupation with information that will support this or that political and policy agenda. It seems government has been losing its capacity to think—that would be a good hypothesis for a book project.

**PAR:** That brings us to neutral competence. You wrote one of the classic analyses of "neutral competence," and in doing so, you argued that neutral competence is a normative ideal rather than an empirical assertion. Tell us a bit about how neutral competence should work.

**Heclo:** Neutral competence wasn't a phrase or idea that originated with me. It goes back to the 1930s public administration literature, from there to the Progressive Era's "good government" and municipal reform movements, and before that to the idea of a professional rather than a patronage-riddled military service. Enlightened reformers realized that our modern democracy needed to create a career military that would be both competent as a military force and nonpartisan and responsive to civilian officials, the people without guns. The idea of creating a civilian counterpart to the professional military service is something, I think, that inspired Civil War veterans like James A. Garfield and John Wesley Powell who pushed for civil service reforms. And before that, it goes back to even older ecclesiastical religious concepts of "office."

In *A Government of Strangers*, I am at pains to point out the inevitable tension that exists between the political demand for change and institutional demand for continuity. However, there is—at least potentially—an immensely valuable third force that can be at work, and that is the idea of a civil service. This perspective is committed to both professional standards and

knowledge of the government, and also to being loyal—positively and constructively and not merely obediently—to every succession of political leaders. Administrative experience, institutional memory, and professional skill should serve politically appointed executives—that is the competence side. But over time, such institutionalized competence should serve with equal loyalty every succession of legitimate partisan executives—that is the neutral mentality between the two political parties. Describing this in the abstract is like telling fairy tales; when you see it in person, it becomes more real.

**PAR:** One of your maxims is that a high calling of career civil servants could be characterized as "loyalty that argues back." Explain how this would work in an ideal American government.

**Heclo:** What is civil service there for? Political appointees—and especially the impatient people in the White House—think that the bureaucracy is there to take orders and get the job done. But the civil service idea is not simply about passive obedience. It is about valuing a process of governing in which the perspectives of those with administrative experience and competence can make a positive contribution to governmental deliberations. It means you give your best advice, based on professional experience in the workings of government and policy making, to help the people to whom you are officially responsible. But if the person in charge doesn't want frank advice, it will be difficult. In my book, I talk about appointees who come to the job with the notion that "all I want is obedience, and I don't want people to argue back." Well, you usually find those are the classic disasters of political leadership in the bureaucracy because nobody then feels obliged to come to the boss with bad news or warnings. These losers end up getting told only what they want to hear—a recipe for losing touch with reality. Career civil servants have experience with what happened the last time something was tried, how members of Congress are likely to react, what realities of implementation are likely to spoil the boss's great new idea, and so on. But as important as it is, in our system, it can be a dangerous thing for a civil servant to argue back. The intense partisanship and arrogance of power playing itself out at the political level can lead to shooting the messenger rather than confronting the problem, and since I wrote my book, we seem to be seeing more and more messenger shooting.

**PAR:** In your 1980 article "The Changing Presidential Office," you argue that the president's "choice is to run or be run by his office." Has that basic challenge become easier or more difficult for presidents to deal with in recent years?

**Heclo:** In times past, a president often dealt more or less personally with the people who would carry out

his directives, but those days are long gone. The White House and the Executive Office of the President have become large bureaucracies. And yet presidents still need to hear things that they do not want to hear. There must be arrangements to ensure that those voices get through not only the departmental bureaucracies but also the White House bureaucracy to engage the president's ears and eyes. Presidents need this because the world is very complex and the meaning of things ambiguous, especially regarding those things that rise to the level of presidential attention. And yes, this basic challenge has become more difficult for presidents in recent years because our politics have become more ideologically blinkered, distrustful, and dominated by activists in the two parties' political bases.

So what I—and much wiser people before me, like Dick Neustadt—tried to say is that any president today needs to take advantage of, rather than dismiss or manage away, the inevitable disagreements that exist within and without the president's channels of advice. The disagreements are inevitable, and not just because of advisers' egos. It's because the truth of things is debatable. A president who thinks he is running his office because everybody in his "executive family" is in sweet harmony is in deep trouble. When this happens, the conflicts will continue below the surface, without the president having the advantage of learning from them.

**PAR:** You also wrote an influential article about "issue networks" in 1978. What are they, and have their dynamics changed?

**Hecllo:** It's really an extension of some things I've already said. By 1978, I was becoming more aware of something I should have realized all along—namely, that whether under Johnson, Nixon, Ford, or Carter, the federal government was increasingly being expected to have a policy about everything. And that expectation was creating a new and enduring incentive to mobilize influence over policy decisions for reasons of pecuniary advantage, cultural identity, religious values, environmental awareness—you name it. My invocation of issue networks was trying to draw attention to these interconnections of people who are extremely attentive to and politically engaged with each other around particular policy issues. It is something different from the older "iron triangles" or sub-governments. Policy activists certainly don't always agree with each other, but they do form de facto working groups of people, politically attentive minorities who are continually watchful and mostly distrustful of each other. The fractious policy networks are always on the lookout to mobilize any larger body of public opinion and media attention for their policy battles. When some of the issues championed by various activists began to involve core values, the

turmoil started to be called a "culture war."

In any event, issue activists are now everywhere in Washington, and they are increasingly important in all aspects of governing and political campaigning.

**PAR:** This sounds like what you referred to in the 1990s as the "permanent campaign." How has this affected the presidency?

**Hecllo:** The permanent campaign is about much more than issue networks. We were shocked in the late 1960s by a book called *The Selling of the President* by Joe McGinnis. It threw a spotlight on Richard Nixon's use of professional public relations techniques to remake his public image in order to run and win in the 1968 election. Today, it is not merely selling a particular personality for a particular election campaign. From the White House selling a war in Iraq on down through almost every political level, the "permanent campaign" is the never-ending effort to massage and mold public opinion to support every kind of political candidate, interest group, and policy agenda. It is a continuously orchestrated presentation of politics as a sophisticated, professionally managed sell job, a staged and phony solicitude for public opinion.

**PAR:** In recent years, you have been teaching and writing more broadly about religion and politics, and you have a book just out with Harvard University Press on that topic. What are your perspectives on the appropriate role of religion in government in general and in the United States in particular?

**Hecllo:** When I wrote *A Government of Strangers*, I was simply talking about the idea of a civil service in the struggle between political appointees and career bureaucrats. But seen more broadly, our ability to deliberate and govern ourselves—our governmental culture—is something that really flows out of our larger culture, and at the root of culture is religion. So that's why I have taken this turn. I begin this new book by saying that religion in general has never really been important in American politics; religion can mean almost anything. It is Christianity that has been important for American political development. I then try to trace the tensioned relationship through which Americans' Christian faith and their democratic faith have shaped each other. So I go all the way back before our colonial era to try to understand this tensioned relationship and bring it up to the current period of the Religious Right and its attempts to use government to pursue its particular policy agenda.

You ask, what is the proper relationship between religion and government? If there is a group of people who are trying to govern themselves and who are, in one way or another, Christian, you necessarily have religion in politics. At the same time, our national government was very wisely framed as a secular



enterprise that does not recognize the authority of any religious denomination or particular set of sectarian doctrines. As an ostensibly Christian society, this is the government we gave ourselves under the Constitution. So in the book, I worry a lot about a “cheapened” version of Christianity that has marched into the public arena and a distorted view of patriotism that has gone along with it. At the same time, I caution against the hard secular view that religious people should somehow be expected to leave their beliefs at the doorstep of the public square. That Rawlsian attempt to delegitimize anything except secular “public reasons” in our public debate is historically uninformed and civically dangerous. We need the Christian prophetic presence in our politics, but it needs to be a Christian presence that understands—in light of its own beliefs—the limitations of its political role and discerns the corruptions of worldly power. I end the book in a contrarian way by arguing that the long-term danger is not theocracy but a withdrawal of sincere, traditional Christians from our political culture.

**PAR:** You recently gave a Bradley Lecture at Boston College on “thinking institutionally.” What were you trying to convey in that lecture?

**Hecló:** It is a rather unfashionable, countercultural worldview I was trying to describe. I was trying to convey a sense of what it’s like to look out into the world from an institutional perspective rather than just to think academically about institutions. What are the distinguishing elements of an appreciation for the integrity of a going concern? What is it in sports not just to play “the game” but to play with respect for the game? There are some people in sports, as well as politics, who play the game brilliantly but do not play with respect for the game. Those who play with respect for the game, whether they know it or not, are thinking institutionally.

By the same token, what is it like in the private sector to think about your business enterprise, not as a short-term generator of bottom lines but as a going concern that needs to be nurtured and cared for? Why do you not cut corners; why do you worry about the long-term consequences of things that seem temporarily advantageous? Or if you are an FBI agent and you see that your bureaucratic superiors are not hearing the warnings, what is it that leads you step outside the chain of command and risk your career because that’s what your job and your agency are about? Thinking institutionally is about a larger sense of loyalty and mission and all those old-fashioned words that have tended to drop out of our thinking about public administration, as well as American organizational life in general.

**PAR:** Speaking of public administration, you recently delivered the Gaus Lecture at the American Political Science Association convention and spoke about the

“spirit of public administration.” What did you mean by that?

**Hecló:** By the “spirit” of the thing, I was referring to the animating commitments, the principles enlivening the very idea of public administration. I was trying to recall core values as to why we have public administration in the first place, and it goes back to the notion of stewardship. This does not mean a monopolistic view of what constitutes the common good but stewardship for the going concern of the public household—to use an old-fashioned term. For example, there is a reason we don’t want favoritism in administration, and it’s not simply because it’s inefficient. It is because personal favoritism violates a sense of public-ness in public administration. The Gaus talk was not about the discipline of public administration but about the calling that is represented by the concept of public administration.

**PAR:** You have written a lot about social welfare policy in the United States (and other countries). Can you make any generalizations that might help us think about future changes that may be necessary to deal with budget deficits and improve social welfare policy?

**Hecló:** Publicly and privately, we have been living beyond our means, borrowing to consume and hoping that the fiscal strain of our aging population will somehow just go away. The needed decisions have been made tougher with each passing year because the less you do to deal with these problems in the early years, the harder the choices become in the out-years. We have been delaying and delaying, and so the decisions will be even more wrenching when they finally have to be made. What we have been taught by our politicians is that we can all have our cake and eat it, too. It’s one concrete example of a systematic failure to think institutionally about our public affairs.

It is unpopular to say the things that need to be said. You are trying to teach people about reality—the responsibilities that need to be faced. This is something that political consultants and pollsters tell you not to do. President Bush spent huge chunks of political capital on the Social Security issue in the nine months after the 2004 election without advancing the public thought process one inch. There was not even a committee hearing about his proposals. It wasn’t really about privatizing Social Security, but there was not even a semi-adult debate on the subject because of the anticipated political dangers that would come from talking to the American people like adults.

At some point, there will be a crisis that will have the shape of a fiscal crisis, and we will have to make very tough decisions. But the real crisis will be in our political culture—not in our fiscal system—because the question will be whether the American people can

face up to the choices that have to be made. The founding fathers believed that there was enough virtue and wisdom in the people and their representatives that they actually would be able to face reality and would seek to know the truth and act on it. Being told simply what they wanted to hear was not the way the people in this republic could sustain themselves. It will probably be at the end of this decade or the beginning of the next that this political/fiscal crisis will hit us.

**PAR:** So it will take real political leadership to deal with this?

**Hecló:** The burden of democratic political leadership is the obligation to teach people about reality, and that, unfortunately, often requires a crisis. But politicians cannot teach well unless the people want to hear it. There must be a desire to hear the truth of things rather than ideological cant and pleasing “earfood.” And that, in turn, requires political leaders to have faith in the people, something that I think our politicians today—surrounded by their consultants, pollsters, and activists—are subconsciously lacking. The framers of the Constitution thought that the people would be virtuous and wise enough to choose good people as their representatives and that those people would, in their interactions and deliberations, make difficult choices and be judged by the people. Representation was to be an ongoing political transaction, and it was weighted with immense significance for the prospects of self-government. The founders saw that the necessary transactions had to occur both between the people and their representatives and among the representatives themselves. They created an institutional design for government by discussion, responsible to the people but at arm’s length. Separate institutions sharing power meant things would have to be sorted out by representatives talking with each other and ultimately seeking public approval. The founders thought they knew what had wrecked Athenian democracy and the Roman republic. It wasn’t foreign enemies that had defeated them. It was the internal demagoguery and a loss of touch with reality. That is why all the founders, Federalist and anti-Federalist alike, were so adamant about the need for both educated citizens and public-spirited officials.

In his farewell address, Washington said something to the effect that the more the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, the more it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened. Our political system has become hypersensitive to public opinion, but in recent decades, our popular political culture has become more benighted than enlightened. The coming generation deserves something better from us.

## Disclosure

This interview took place at Hugh Hecló’s home in White Post, Virginia, on October 28, 2006. After the

interview was transcribed, Dr. Pfiffner edited it for grammar, length, and punctuation. Dr. Hecló then edited the manuscript to ensure that his meaning was captured in the transcription and editing process.

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