

# STEWARDSHIP AND PUBLIC SERVICE: An Introduction



This paper explores the notion of stewardship and its manifestations in the context of the civil service and its various uses as a concept. Overall, stewardship for and by the public services is denoted through its role to protect the long-term capability of the state, including by engaging with strategic long-term thinking and defending the institutions of government from any effort to subvert them, while it exercises due care of public resources. Thus, stewardship may be perceived as an inter-generational obligation, inherited from the past, passed forward to the future, be it in any public domain, e.g., the state of the natural environment, in as good a condition as possible. The paper also discusses how values and behaviours should be adjusted so the civil service maintains its primary focus on its longer-term missions and the expected development outcomes; and how public servants as prudent guardians of the long-term common interests and collective assets, and their willingness and ability as stewards, to earn the public trust through a consistent demonstration of effectiveness, credible attitudes, behaviours, and interactions.

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**Ebih-II, steward of Mari c. 2500 BCE**



*The alabaster 52cm high statue from 25th-century BC depicts the praying figure of Ebih-II, steward of the Sumerian city-state of Mari. The statue of perhaps the earliest steward in recorded history, was discovered at the site of the Temple of Ishtar in Mari during excavations between 1933 and 1975. Louvre Museum, item AO17551: Image usage authorised from Wikimedia Commons.*



## Prologue

The concept of stewardship encapsulates the perennial mission of the public service; the preservation of the long-term capability of state institutions to act for the greater public good, including the responsible care of public resources. It neatly summarises the fundamental purpose of the public service and public servants: striving to address the long-term concerns for their fellow citizens and for their country, by nurturing the inherited legacy of the past, and by clarifying different alternatives, adopting the best possible options for the coming years.

It begins with a meticulous introduction of stewardship in the context of the civil service and its various uses as a concept. Stewardship for and by the public service is mostly expressed through its role to protect the long-term capability of the state, including by engaging with strategic futures thinking, and to defend the institutions of government from any efforts to subvert them, while it exercises due care of public resources. Thus, it requires looking beyond the immediate, identifying how best to safeguard the interests of future generations, and grappling with intergenerational fairness. Hence, stewardship is an inter-generational obligation, inherited from the past, passed forward to the future, be it in any public policy domain, e.g., the state of the natural environment, in as good a condition as possible.

The paper also delves into a discussion of the potential influence and implications for public service reform and development in the 21st Century and the potential impact of public service stewardship on the pressing challenges contemporary public administrations face. The ultimate messages emerging, from this discussion, are (1) how values and behaviours should be adjusted so that the civil service maintains its primary focus on its longer-term mission and the expected development outcomes of a country; and (2) how public servants act as prudent guardians of the long-term common interests and collective assets, and their willingness and ability as stewards, to earn the public trust through a consistent demonstration of effectiveness, credible attitudes, behaviours, and interactions.

It concludes by emphasizing the need – now more than ever - for strong international cooperation between public services to ensure that countries have the means to build back better and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Each country should consider how fostering stewardship in public service can build national trust and legitimacy.

This paper is another contribution of the Astana Civil Service Hub, congruent with its mandate for knowledge sharing among its participating countries, thus fulfilling their explicit demand for contemporary knowledge and experience pertinent to the field of public administration and civil service development. It is also a worthy addition to the body of knowledge on public service development and its ultimate purpose, that is to truly serve the public interest over self-interest. A formidable task.



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## **About the Astana Civil Service Hub (ACSH)**

The Astana Civil Service Hub is a flagship initiative of the Government of Kazakhstan and the United Nations Development Programme. It was created in 2013 by five international organisations and 25 countries: now comprising 43 participating countries. The geographical range of its participants stretches from the Americas and Europe through the CIS, the Caucasus, and Central Asia to ASEAN countries, demonstrating that partnerships for civil service excellence is a constant and universal need for all nations.

Its primary mandate is to assist in the promotion of public service effectiveness by supporting the efforts of governments of the participating countries in building institutional and human capacity; and thus, contributing to the improvement of civil service systems in the countries of the region and beyond.

The Astana Civil Service Hub is a multilateral institutional platform for the continuous exchange of knowledge and experience in the field of public service development, aiming at supporting government in the region through fostering partnerships, capacity building and peer-to-peer learning activities, and evidence-based research.

More information at [www.astanacivilservicehub.org](http://www.astanacivilservicehub.org).

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## Stewardship

*“Stewardship, at its best, could provide an organising principle for power in society transcending economics to base itself on the common interest.”<sup>1</sup>*

The Irish politician Edmund Burke (1729-1797), in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), famously described the State as an inter-generational partnership: “not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.” The social contract arose between citizens of the past, and of the present; it was also an organic union with people’s ancestors and posterity. These contractual relations depended on responsible and accountable stewards for their preservation and long-term governance.

The core meaning of the term ‘stewardship’ is long-term concern for others, fostering today the inherited legacy of the past and, by clarifying different alternative futures, adopting the best possible option for the coming years. The word ‘steward’, from the Proto-Germanic *stigweard*, referred in medieval Europe to a senior domestic servant (*weard*) who maintained the upkeep of a royal or noble household (*stig*). The responsibilities of the *stigweard* combined elements of manager, administrator, supervisor, curator, custodian, keeper, organiser, major-domo, trustee, and guardian, from which derives stewardship’s modern meaning, as the responsibility to accountably protect, nurture and develop assets entrusted as a long-term duty of care by their owners.

Although it is applied in diverse ways, the concept of stewardship does have universal features, and is as old as society.<sup>2</sup> The term exists in many languages: for example, *Welayah* وِلايَة, in Arabic, प्रबंधक पद in Hindi, *intendant* in French, while in Japan the Grand Steward is a senior official of the Imperial household.

**Stewardship’s core meaning is long-term commitment to the public good.**

In the UK, Members of Parliament are not permitted to resign their seats in the House of Commons. If they want to give up being elected representatives of the people, they must apply for an "office of profit under the Crown", which requires MPs to quit parliament. The notional job they must be appointed to, to fulfil this condition has been, since the middle of the 18th century, the Steward for the Chiltern Hundreds. This is an ancient royal administrative area in England that had declined to a sinecure in public administration by the 17th century.

Like many public service constructs, stewardship in the public sector can be traced back to the origins of state bureaucracy on cuneiform clay tablets, in Sumeria and Assyria some 4500 years ago.<sup>3</sup> One of the first known stewards (‘*agrig*’ in Sumerian) is Ebih-II of Mari, c. 2400 BCE.<sup>4</sup>

*The careful and responsible management of the well-being of the population – stewardship – is the very essence of good government. ... government responsibility for it is continuous and permanent.*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Saltman, R., and O. Ferroussier-Davis. (2000). The concept of stewardship in health policy. *Bulletin of the World Health Organisation*. 78:6, p. 735.

<sup>2</sup> The Arabic word *khalīfah* (خليفة, plural: *Khulafā*) in the Qur’ān (eg. 6:165), refers to humans as God’s Stewards on Earth. The term acquired its modern governance meaning after Muhammad’s death in 632 CE, when Abū Bakr was elected leader of the Muslim community and assumed the title *Khalīfat Rasūl Allāh*, “Successor Of The Messenger Of God”. خليفة now means steward of the state in the transnational community of Islam, a caliphate.

<sup>3</sup> Postgate, N. (2013). *Bronze Age Bureaucracy: Writing and the Practice of Government in Assyria*.

<sup>4</sup> Everest-Phillips, M. (2019). *Lessons from Lagash: Public Service at the Start of History and Now*. In Baimenov, A., and Liverakos, P. (Eds) *Public Service Excellence in the 21st Century*. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore.

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organisation (WHO), 2000.

## Institutions not only organisations

This gives a small illustration of how the concept of stewardship has a long and rich history in both the private and public sectors, much older than the word's root in the Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> Stewardship can reflect attributes of the careful custodian, conscientious curator, diligent guardian, honest trustee, concerned administrator and responsible manager of collective assets - shared resources, institutions and organisations, systems and assets, tangible and intangible, public or private - that are entrusted by joint owners and stakeholders (including citizenry, electorates and communities) to the long-term duty of care of stewards.<sup>7</sup>

The result is variously overlapping, and sometimes leading to conflicting definitions of stewardship in public administration. This review identified five distinct strands to stewardship in the public sector:<sup>8</sup> (1) Stewardship is rooted in responsible "fiduciary duties", involving care of public resources;<sup>9</sup> (2) motivation, mindset and attitude to work; (3) system-wide approach, to address complex problems; (4) to engage with the traditions of stewardship of indigenous 'first nations'; (5) independent role: to protect the long-term capability of the state, and to defend the immediate institutions of government. To fulfil that role effectively, this research paper describes how values and behaviours derived from stewardship help the civil service maintain its focus and motivation.

Stewards must be capable of looking beyond the immediate time horizon, be alert to emerging risks, be able to identify how best to safeguard the interests of future generations, and grapple with the demands of intergenerational fairness. Such demanding attributes are at the heart of the ability to exercise today proper care of tomorrow, informed by a long historical view and strategic foresight, anticipating remote risks and potential opportunities, and acting prudently – in short, demonstrating due care.<sup>10</sup>

Stewardship in public service, therefore, describes the public sector as a prudent guardian of the long-term common interest and collective assets:<sup>11</sup> the willingness and ability of stewards to earn the public trust through consistent demonstration of effectiveness, credible attitudes (values, motivation) and process (behaviours, interactions).

Stewardship is an intergenerational obligation, inherited from the past, passed forward to the future, be it in public health or the state of the natural environment, in as good a condition as possible. This chain of rights and obligations resulted in April 2021 in Germany's supreme constitutional court ruling that the country's climate legislation violated the rights of future generations.

Effective stewards think ahead, able to gaze critically into possible futures. Stewardship provides stability and a progressive response to short-termism, with the goal of the maintenance of long-term public value, aiming at leaving assets in better condition than received for future generations.

At its most fundamental, stewardship expresses "service over self-interest" and the accountability of managers and employees to preserve and enhance material and non-material assets, which

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<sup>6</sup> Ross, A., K. Sherman, J. Snodgrass, H. Delcore, and Richard Sherman. (2016). *Indigenous Peoples and the Collaborative Stewardship of Nature: Knowledge Binds and Institutional Conflicts*. Routledge.

<sup>7</sup> Armstrong, J. (1997). *Stewardship and Public Service: A Discussion Paper Prepared for The Public Service Commission of Canada*. Canada: Canadian Public Service Commission.

<sup>8</sup> Meta (the owner of Facebook) updated the company's "values" (i.e., tangible, and intangible valuables, including convenient platitudes?) in 2021 to include "focus on long term impact". This suggests that the 'long term' is currently, (at least briefly), fashionable in the private sector too, doubtless due in large measure to present widespread reputational concerns over environmental sustainability and climate change.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., the biblical parable of the good servants (see below).

<sup>10</sup> Kass, H. (1988). *Stewardship as a Fundamental Element in Images of Public Administration*. *Dialogue* 10, no. 2: 2–48; Block, P. (1993). *Stewardship. Choosing Service over Self-Interest*. San Francisco.

<sup>11</sup> The meaning captures the sense of a reliable, diligent servant. Synonyms, with a wide range of nuance, include responsive trusteeship, honest guardianship, selfless management, ethical leadership, and good governance.

includes not only organisations, but also institutions, such as values and behaviours. Stewardship describes responsible management, over the long view, of assets entrusted for the common good. Stewardship as professional pro-active duty of care is applied in public administration. This requires public officials explicitly to nurture the long-term benefit by exercising foresight, anticipating risks, and spotting opportunities, and acting prudently: in short, good governance.

This immediately raises two fundamental questions for the scope of civil service stewardship: Is the legitimacy of the public service solely derived from the elected government, so that officials should only act insofar as they are directed by ministers? Or, in reflecting its *'de facto'* institutional permanence, does the civil service have a separate duty of care, aside from the present government's concerns, for independently preparing long-term to equip future governments with the capacity and capabilities to be fit for purpose?

Although stewardship can express duty performed independently of ministers that maintains public institutions for the long-term, the futures component draws on a rich legacy of prediction, while emphasising that its methodology seeks to understand trends and predict the policy options.

### **The Garden of Eden**

Humanity's role in theology as 'stewards of the earth' is deeply intertwined with the development of the state, and the institutions of government and bureaucracy, in addressing the common good.<sup>12</sup> Stewardship of the environment or health also involves stewardship of the public institutions concerned. The Monotheistic religions believe that God put Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden with a special responsibility to steward creation wisely. This 'dominium' is still being used to justify an anthropocentric, or human-centred, environment.

The Old Testament story of Joseph is an early example of stewardship attracting public trust. Sold by his older brothers into slavery, he eventually became the steward of Egypt. Joseph's idealised senior civil service skills included intelligence, discretion, integrity, self-confidence, and foresight, enabling him to skilfully manage the country's political master, the Pharaoh:

*"And the Pharaoh said to Joseph, ..., there is no-one so discreet and wise as you are: you shall be over my house, and according to your word shall all my people be ruled: only in the throne will I be greater than you" (Genesis 41: 38-40).*

Joseph's strategic thinking enabled him to anticipate future trends and develop plans during seven good years to address the challenges for the bad times to come. Thanks to this, Egypt thrived while neighbouring nations experienced severe hardship.<sup>13</sup>

The New Testament's parable of the three servants (Luke 17: 7–10; 19: 11-27; also see Matthew 25: 14-30) is another biblical classic of stewardship, that reflects that concern. A merchant appointed three employees to care for his assets while he went off on a long journey. Two servants nurtured his resources and made their value increase. The third, from fear of failure, buried the valuables in the ground. When the master returned, he praised the first two servants and chastised the third.

The moral is clear. The steward has responsibility to act accountably for the greater good (whereas a trustee is expected to prioritise protecting the asset). Those tasked with stewardship require the ability and drive to improve, where possible, not to fail because of the lack of possibility for personal gain.<sup>14</sup> A modern active approach to stewardship was expressed in "Put no trust in princes" (Psalm 146), matching the definition put forward by the New Zealand Treasury in 2017:

<sup>12</sup> E.g., in the cuneiform clay tablets of Assyria, stewardship drove the development of bureaucracy.

<sup>13</sup> Another important lesson about stewardship was motivation. Joseph's reward was intrinsic self-actualised learning from experiences to be a better advisor to the Pharaoh.

<sup>14</sup> Travis, P., D. Egger, P. Davies, and A. Mechbal. (2003). "Towards Better Stewardship: Concepts and Critical Issues." In *Health Systems Performance*: 289–300. Geneva: World Health Organisation.

*“a responsibility [for] adopting a whole-of-system, life-cycle view of regulation, and taking a proactive, collaborative approach, to the monitoring and care of the regulatory system(s) within which they have policy or operational responsibilities”;*

noting further that:

*“regulatory agencies are expected to do all this actively without requiring their minister’s explicit direction or permission”.*

In this definition, stewardship is performed by public administrators independent of the explicit permission of a minister (today’s equivalent to the merchant in the Bible).

The then head of the Catholic church Pope Francis issued in 2015 the encyclical *‘Laudato Si’*, with the subtitle *‘Care of our Common Home’*. In this address to the faithful of all religions, he warned against prioritising the needs of humanity over the rest of creation. Rather, he suggested, development (this was the time when the Millennium Development Goals were replaced by the Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs), “should be understood as responsible stewardship” (section 116). This ‘responsible stewardship’ was built on a culture of the *“relación de reciprocidad”* (as he put it in his native tongue), for the vulnerable (sec. 10), “for all that exists” (sec. 11), of creation (sec. 14, and 211), “for safeguarding species” (sec. 42), for nature and the environment (sec. 64), for neighbours (sec. 70), “for our own lives” (sec. 70), for a fragile world (sec. 78), “for the world” (sec. 144), for indigenous communities and traditions (sec. 146), for the land (sec. 146), for homes of the poor (sec. 148), for the body (sec. 155), “for the ecosystem of the entire earth” (sec. 167), “for our brothers and sisters” (sec. 208), care for the natural environment (sec. 208), for other living beings (sec. 211), for all creatures (sec. 213), for the common good (sec. 225), and for the quality of life for the poor (sec. 232).

Stewardship by (and of) the public service is essential to achieving these ambitions, locally, nationally, and internationally. Government effectiveness depends to no small extent on the quality of the civil service, and its capacity to formulate and implement effective policies.<sup>15</sup> The OECD in

**Stewardship means responsible management, over the long view, of assets entrusted for the common good.**

2019 called for member countries’ public services to take “a long-term perspective in the design and implementation of policy and services.”<sup>16</sup> But how can this be done, when the politically urgent drives out the longer-term?

This is further complicated in our current, restless era, in which many people no longer instinctively trust mainstream organisations, whether public or private. With varying degrees of perceived probity, ancient universities, scientific research bodies, government agencies, the social media are all questioned as reliable sources of truth.

Stewards are trustworthy administrators who are motivated by intrinsic factors and peer respect, working best in enabling organisations which delegate appropriate levels of professional autonomy, discretion, and accountability.<sup>17</sup> The importance attached to non-pecuniary rewards for civil servants, although often viewed as an anachronism, is shown by the ‘Honours’ systems around the world. For example, the New Zealand Public Service Medal, awarded in 2021 to ten public servants who demonstrated an outstanding commitment to their nation. Stewards are similarly exemplary for other public service employees.

<sup>15</sup> van der Wal, Z. (2020). ‘Chapter 2. Trends and drivers of public administration in the twenty-first century.’ In Handbook on Corruption, Ethics, and Integrity in Public Administration. Cheltenham, UK.

<sup>16</sup> The OECD Recommendations on Public Service Leadership and Capability, Paris.

<sup>17</sup> Pierre, J., and B. G. Peters. (2017). “The Shirking Bureaucrat: A Theory in Search of Evidence?” Policy & Politics 45(2): 157–72.

At times the term ‘stewardship’ can be largely synonymous with trusteeship, guardianship, custodianship, or curatorship, through fiduciary duty of care, due diligence, fiscal responsibility, official accountability, appropriate usage, public ethics on sustainability, and management morality.<sup>18</sup> The specific meanings of stewardship are context-dependent yet share the balance of effective trust and embedded legitimacy in guarding the positive legacy from past, conserving by fostering a long view into the future, acting prudently by foresight to anticipate risks and opportunities.<sup>19</sup>

Being an effective steward requires demonstrating sound judgment and the moral credibility to win trust and build legitimacy.<sup>20</sup> Public servants are tasked with the management of public goods, like clean air and water.

## Data stewardship

Data, the most recent public stewardship issue involves the careful management of data within legitimate purposes and over time. This is a culture of stewardship where public officials (as ‘data stewards’) must handle, and be seen to handle, personal information with “care and integrity”. Data stewardship is an ethic or ‘mindset’ that constructs public trust and legitimacy.

In response, the New Zealand Government has appointed a ‘Government Chief Data Steward’, responsible for supporting data stewardship across the public service, and the government’s statistical agency, Statistics New Zealand, published in 2019 a ‘Data Stewardship Framework’. This strategy document describes the structure required for effective data accountability and responsibility and the processes that ensure effective control and authorised use of data assets. The data framework suggests that a “stewardship” mindset is required to understand that governance is as much an enabling mechanism as it is one for control.

This responsible management, over the long view, of assets entrusted for the common good builds a culture of stewardship, the careful and responsible creation, collection, management, and use of data, where public officials as data stewards handle information with “care and integrity.” Stewardship means stewardship of the institutions involved, including in organisational ‘mindsets’. Statistics New Zealand, describes the effective long-term data management designed to win public credibility.<sup>21</sup> It suggests that there are seven key elements required for effective data stewardship, which are largely generic for much of public sector stewardship:

- 1) Strategy and culture** – a strategy that provides a shared vision and clear direction, and a culture that enables strategy implementation and sustains good data stewardship practice;
- 2) Rules and settings** – legislation, policies, principles, and sanctions providing boundaries and guiding how the data system should operate;
- 3) Roles, responsibilities, accountabilities** – governance structures, role definitions and expectations, and leadership;

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<sup>18</sup> E.g., the systematic effort to educate and persuade those who prescribe antimicrobials to follow evidence-based prescribing, in order to stem antibiotic overuse, and thus antimicrobial resistance.

<sup>19</sup> Moon, K., Marsh, D., Dickinson, H. and Carey, G. (2017). Is All Stewardship Equal? Developing a Typology of Stewardship Approaches. Public Service Research Group Issues Paper Series: Issues Paper No. 2. University of New South Wales, Canberra.

<sup>20</sup> “Staff ‘still angry’ at sacking of permanent secretary and alarmed at lack of transparent costings”: Guardian headline 23 September 2022, on perceived political interference with the public service at the Treasury (finance ministry) in the UK.

<sup>21</sup> Statistics New Zealand. Data Stewardship in New Zealand – Responsible and ethical data management and use, New Zealand: 2019.

- 4) Data capability and quality** – tools, processes, designs, meta-data structures, and platforms for managing, storing, describing, and sharing data;
- 5) People capability and literacy** – skills, knowledge, and services for accessing, managing, analysing, and communicating data and insights;
- 6) Influence and advocacy** – effective relationships and networks to endorse, promote, and support good data practice; and
- 7) Monitoring and assurance** – assessing environmental trends and developments, measuring stewardship performance, and adapting the stewardship toolkit to respond to changing circumstances or new information.

## Stewardship: managing unpredictability and the COVID-19 pandemic

### ***Stewardship: the art of getting things done amidst a complex and dynamic context.*<sup>22</sup>**

Stewarding public policies into implementation often involves collaboration across different public service cultures of decision-making. Stewardship is a core skill for agents of change, able to hold neutral ground for new ideas; disrupt expectations; create a sense of urgency; clarify evidence, awareness, and approvals necessary for change to happen.

In a crisis, ministries have to move rapidly, often responding to different urgent needs at the same time, coordination and immediate priorities are carried out, to take a government-wide view. Civil servants must act as honest stewards, alerting their political overlords to the potential conflicts in the system, and the trade-offs that are involved.<sup>23</sup> One important finding on the weakness of civil service stewardship in a pandemic is that governments should plan where an agile system-wide stewardship might come from in a crisis, that allows for longer-term learning. Differing activities may not cohere at a system level, for instance the panic procurement at the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis to secure personal protection equipment at scale. Long-lasting decisions and investments were made at great speed without due consideration of the potential conflicts, complications and trade-offs that might be involved. The political challenge to stewardship from vested interests can feel overwhelming.<sup>24</sup> Stewardship develops with implementation phase, differing from traditional project management techniques in opening up the opportunity to change directions, both tactical and strategic, once work has begun as new information about the problem becomes available.

Stewardship can be understood as a form of agile calibration between evolving contextual realities and desired outcomes. Strategic intent in folding the future back into the present requires a constant search for the connection between objectives, methods, and systems dynamics. This requires modifications to traditional approaches.

Bureaucrats are well aware that action is easier and acceptable to plan and complete on time and on budget, even if the project does not improve the problem it was designed to tackle, but often provides political benefits and/or corrupt funds. This introduces the need to rethink assumptions or allocate resources differently. The adaptive approaches to resourcing, authority, timeframes, and process present in a steward make meaningful collaboration possible.

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<sup>22</sup> Statistics New Zealand. Data Stewardship in New Zealand – Responsible and ethical data management and use, New Zealand: 2019.

<sup>23</sup> E.g., Anthony King's and Ivor Crewe's *The Blunders of our Governments* (2013) examines the UK government's mistakes, despite the United Kingdom being in many ways a well-governed country; with the characteristics of stewardship for most British politicians and civil servants as models of both rectitude and public-spiritedness.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., In the UK, between March and July 2020, new contracts for urgently needed medical supplies worth £17.3 billion were awarded by the government, of which £10.5 billion directly, without any competition. As a result, enormous amounts of wastage and possible corruption have subsequently come to light, such as the fifty million face masks bought in April 2020 that could not be used in the NHS because they did not meet specifications.

## Long-term sustainability of government institutions

Public service stewardship's most fundamental aim is to protect the long-term sustainability of a country's system of government, and support public confidence in this outcome, earning the public's trust by effectiveness and ethical conduct.<sup>25</sup> Because this purpose supports long-term public trust and confidence in public institutions, the government of New Zealand has argued that this function can be in this respect independent of the government of the day.<sup>26</sup>

*Governments should be the "stewards" of their national resources, maintaining and improving them for the benefit of their populations. In health, this means being ultimately responsible for the careful management of their citizens' well-being.*<sup>27</sup>

## Progressive, or patronising?

But stewardship is, however, a 'magic' chameleon concept, that is, one with notably varied and often contested definitions. Such terminology is widely used, in academic and political discourse, to obfuscate conceptual dilemmas and distinctions.<sup>28</sup>

One attraction of the term 'stewardship' might be that it exhibits a normative concept as seemingly desirable. On first impression, 'stewardship' like 'good governance' conveys positive progressive connotations of benevolent behaviour, working for a higher purpose and even involving self-sacrifice but, on further reflection, can also seem patronising and paternalistic. This is particularly true when technical expertise in stewardship appears to curtail individual freedom of choice, such as over compulsory vaccination or mandatory mask-wearing in public places during the 2020 Covid pandemic.

**Public stewardship's most fundamental aim is to protect the long-term sustainability of a country's system of government.**

The climate change crisis has renewed attention to intergenerational equity; while the COVID-19 pandemic awakened a deep political divide about trust in government, over how far preventive measures in public health (perhaps the most existential collective action problem) can legitimately constrain or deprive people of individual freedoms or facilitate the perceived legitimacy of the state. Since the 2007-2008 financial crisis, no more than about a quarter of Americans expressed trust in the federal government to do what is right all or most of the time.<sup>29</sup> The OECD across 22 member countries found that trust and distrust are evenly split: on average 41.4% trust their national government, and 41.4% do not.<sup>30</sup>

## New Public Management

Stewardship establishes credibility regarding the collective good. This can involve regulating for well-being through technical expertise in specialised fields, like environmental ecology or bi-medical ethics, and in enforcing professional standards.<sup>31</sup> For example, anti-microbial stewardship

<sup>25</sup> Department of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet of New Zealand. 2021. "Stewardship."

<sup>26</sup> State Services Commission 2019, appendix 1.

<sup>27</sup> World Health Organisation (WHO), p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> Pollitt, C., and P. Hope. (2011). "Talking About Government: The Role of Magic Concepts". *Public Management Review* 13, no. 5: 641–58.

<sup>29</sup> Pew Research Centre 2022.

<sup>30</sup> OECD. (2022). Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy: Main Findings of the 2021 OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions is the first and most exhaustive cross-national gauge of what drives public trust in open democratic governments.

<sup>31</sup> Hickford, Mark. (2017). "Situating Stewardship in the State Sector: Considering 'Legislative Stewardship' in Context" *New Zealand Journal of Public and International Law* 15, no. 1: 39–65.

seeks to measure and improve how antibiotics are prescribed by clinicians and used by patients. Another idiosyncratic example is the Australian Bedding Stewardship Council. This body implements a product scheme for the appropriate care and responsible disposal of the country's beds and mattresses.<sup>32</sup>

New Zealand's Public Service Act 2020 has placed stewardship in public service at the centre of its public service reform (PSR).<sup>33</sup> This may prove to be as profound as the country's PSR in 1988. That legislation provided expression of New Public Management (NPM), the contemporary belief that "civil servants never knowingly serve the state, but instead pursue their own rational self-interest". NPM assumed principal-agent (owners-employees) tension, as employees are extrinsically motivated, untrustworthy, and therefore need to be controlled through transactional incentives.

By contrast, 'New Public Stewardship' describes a strong relationship between personal job satisfaction and organisational success. Everything being equal, employees will act as responsible stewards for the assets they control.<sup>34</sup>

<b>Comparison of Agency Theory and Stewardship Theory</b> (adapted from Davis, Schoorman, and Donaldson, 1997)		
<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Agency Theory</b>	<b>Stewardship Theory</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Model of Man               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behaviour</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Psychological Mechanisms               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivation</li> <li>• Social Comparison</li> <li>• Identification</li> <li>• Power</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Situational Mechanisms</li> <li>• Management Philosophy               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk orientation</li> <li>• Time frame</li> <li>• Objective</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Cultural Differences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• economic man</li> <li>• self-serving</li> <li>• lower order/economic needs (physiological, security, economic)</li> <li>• extrinsic</li> <li>• other managers</li> <li>• low value commitment</li> <li>• institutional (legitimate, coercive, reward)</li> <li>• control oriented</li> <li>• control mechanisms</li> <li>• short term</li> <li>• cost control</li> <li>• individualism</li> <li>• high power distance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• self-actualizing man</li> <li>• collective serving</li> <li>• higher order needs (growth, achievement, self-actualisation)</li> <li>• intrinsic</li> <li>• stakeholders</li> <li>• high value commitment</li> <li>• personal (expert, referent)</li> <li>• involvement oriented</li> <li>• trust</li> <li>• long term</li> <li>• performance enhancement</li> <li>• collectivism</li> <li>• low power distance</li> </ul>

**Figure 1. Stewardship employee motivation theory**

Source: Davis, J., F. Schoorman, and L. Donaldson. (1997). "Toward a Stewardship Theory of Management." *The Academy of Management Review* 22, no. 1: 20–47.

Stewardship is premised on the belief that motivation to work in the civil service cannot be understood by the constraints and limitations of the private sector.<sup>35</sup> Instead, public officialdom, in general, values the concept of service to the greater good over self-interest. Officials can be motivated by building public trust, wanting to ensure the sustainability of the public service

<sup>32</sup> In May 2022, the Australian Bedding Stewardship Council applied for authorisation for five years to establish and operate a voluntary, industry-led product stewardship scheme, 'Recycle My Mattress'. The stewardship with "life cycle", and "end-to-end" management, aims to increase resource recovery and the diversion of waste from landfill, and minimise the environmental, and health and safety impacts of end-of-life mattresses.

<sup>33</sup> Scott, R, and E. Merton. (2021). Stewardship streams in New Zealand public administration. State Services Commission.

<sup>34</sup> Schillemans, Thomas. (2013). "Moving Beyond the Clash of Interests: On Stewardship Theory and the Relationships between Central Government Departments and Public Agencies". *Public Management Review* 15, no. 4: 541–62.

<sup>35</sup> Preston, L. (1998). "Agents, Stewards, and Stakeholders". *The Academy of Management Review* 23, no. 1: 9-29.



beyond their own careers, prioritising the possibility of working with a collective orientation, and nurturing the duty of care over management of the perpetually scarce resources.

Public service motivation, the readiness to serve the long-term national interest to work for the improvement of society, is about beliefs, personal values, and attitudes that go beyond personal interests, motivating individuals to engage in beneficial activities for the community or society. Public service motivation plays an important role in the public sector stewardship.

Research on public service ethos suggests that public sector employees have high morale and altruistic motivation when they feel that they are working for the common good.<sup>36</sup> This explains why Stewardship in an alignment of common values and trust can motivate collective action towards agreed objectives.

### Culture of stewardship

The New Zealand government is remarkable for its overt ambition of building a culture of stewardship across its Public Service.<sup>37</sup> Civil servants, at their best, work for something outside

**Public Stewardship is the duty to maintain institutions for the long-term “between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born”.**

their own self-interest, to seek a greater universal good, as responsible stewards of the assets under their control. The implication for this principal-steward contractual relationship, is that there is less need for the principal to specify inputs and outputs in such detail, based on a deeper trusting

relationship that assumes goal alignment. Stewards' motives are aligned with the objectives of their principals, their relationship maintained with less institutional power, rather the low power distance with a personal style of leadership fosters loyalty and respect that decrease the need for control and oversight. Public stewardship attracts the pro-socially motivated to public service<sup>38</sup> or, in the words of the NZ Public Service Act 2020, people with ‘a spirit of service to the community’.<sup>39</sup>

Stewardship emerged in the 1990s as a critique of agency theory, and particularly of the assumption of self-maximisation. Replacing the ‘agent’ with the ‘steward’, the strength of stewardship is predicated upon the behavioural maxims of self-actualisation, belonging, achievement, development, responsibility, and collective goals. Information asymmetry notwithstanding, shared objectives reduce opportunism on the part of the steward. The steward can be rewarded with greater autonomy, as the minister (principal) has less to fear the steward’s self-interest. The difference between agency and stewardship is the model of employees as ‘self-actualising’. The distinction is between extrinsic versus intrinsic motivations, with a steward as someone who acts selflessly.<sup>40</sup>

Operationalising stewardship can be seen through some eighty-five development projects of the World Bank referencing support to stewardship, overwhelmingly in the health sector. One example is the five-year Health System strengthening Programme for Results US\$ 9.3m Project, starting in 2020, to improve the quality and efficiency of non-communicable disease (NCD) prevention and control in Samoa. The country’s NCD policy is founded on the government’s essential interventions of NCD control at the primary health care and community setting. This

<sup>36</sup> Block, P. (1993). *Stewardship. Choosing Service over Self-Interest*. San Francisco.

<sup>37</sup> New Zealand State Services Commission, 2015, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> Perry, James L., and A. Hondeghem, (Eds). (2008). *Motivation in Public Management: The Call of Public Service*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>39</sup> Public Service Act 2020, section 13.

<sup>40</sup> Van Slyke, David M. (2007). “Agents or Stewards: Using Theory to Understand the Government – Non-profit Social Service Contracting Relationship.” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 17, no. 2: 157–87.

has supported the national NCD action plan, including through strengthening multi-sectoral NCD programme stewardship and institutional capacity.<sup>41</sup>

## Politics of Stewardship

Stewardship tends to be best suited to uncertainty and complexity, precisely because what constitutes the “long-term public interest” is often contentious. Societies have multiple often contradictory long-term interests, which the political process will continue to struggle to adjust.

The NZ 2020 Act offered a definition of the purpose of public service. This is stated to be:

*The public service supports constitutional and democratic government, enables both the current Government and successive governments to develop and implement their policies, delivers high-quality and efficient public services, supports the Government to pursue the long-term public interest, facilitates active citizenship, and acts in accordance with the law.*

Stewardship expresses the political view that governments’ responsibility is to promote, protect and preserve society:

*The core contention is that while focusing the policy process on traditional principal-agent relationships can create an efficient state, it is possible to create a state that is not only efficient but good by emphasising normative, ethically oriented expectations of stewardship.<sup>42</sup>*

However, the argument is contested.<sup>43</sup> The potential for public servants to be stewards of the public interest is frequently complicated by a political climate often seemingly with little regard for the common good, social equity, or shared sacrifice.

Stewardship depends on the ‘political settlement’, the way that violence is contained by the political process that allocates power and resources and resolves the extent to which public officials generally abide by the law, or conversely, the degree to which public administration is characterised by corruption.

Courage ‘to speak truth to power’ marks the strength of stewardship. The public service should seek to act as a learning culture that requires safety for questioning politicians’ ideas and challenging traditional ideologies, in which creativity is encouraged. Stewardship must be supported by a non-partisan spirit of public service between conflicting public interests. The crucial role of politicians and politics is to embrace the potential of stewardship to find ways of managing society’s conflicts so as to avoid violence, to preserve the legitimacy of the governance system and to promote shared interests.

**Public Sector Motivation effects stewardship, including leadership.**

To achieve that ambition, stewardship requires citizens’ lasting trust in the judgment and the good faith of the public organisations and institutions of the state:

*The careful and responsible management of the well-being of the population – stewardship – is the very essence of good government.<sup>44</sup>*

<sup>41</sup> Health System Strengthening Programme for Results Project 2020-2025 to improve the quality and efficiency of non-communicable disease prevention and control in Samoa.

<sup>42</sup> Saltman R, and O. Ferroussier-Davis. (2000). The concept of stewardship in health policy. *Bulletin of the World Health Organisation*. 78:6, p.735.

<sup>43</sup> Andrews M. (2013). *The limits of institutional reform in development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>44</sup> The World Health Organisation. (2000). *The World Health Report 2000 Health Systems: Improving Performance*. Geneva.

Each generation is both a trustee for the planet with obligations to care for it and a beneficiary with rights to exploit it.<sup>45</sup> ‘Developed’ societies need to rediscover and reaffirm commitment to this balance, in the welfare of future generations, through stewardship of intergenerational equity and well-being. For example, children born in 2020 will probably experience a two- to seven-fold increase in extreme weather events, particularly heat waves, compared with people born in 1960, under current climate policy pledges.<sup>46</sup> How can these different existential challenges for different generations be seen to be fairly handled?

### **(Good) Governance**

*The careful and responsible management of the well-being of the population - stewardship - is the essence of good government.<sup>47</sup>*

Stewardship depends on the governance context (the ‘good’ being a remnant from the 1990s when the World Bank and other international development agencies first began to accept that politics trumped economics in delivering growth and stability).<sup>48</sup> Public service stewardship encourages officials to look beyond the immediate, to be alert to emerging risks, safeguard the interests of future generations, and grapple with the demands of intergenerational justice and well-being. It is, however, remarkable that Great Britain only put the civil service on a statutory footing for the first time in 2010, by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act. This rosy picture of altruistic stewardship with trusting relations between the principal and steward distinguishes between governance ‘good governance’ through the 1990s from formal decision-making, and system stewardship, which involves the curatorship of relationship networks around central government in which responsibility will be shared and control less apparent. Stewardship thrives when public service officials are inherently pro-social, instinctively placing high value on co-operation and trust;<sup>49</sup> and suffer to the degree to which public administration is undermined by corruption and poor governance.<sup>50</sup>

Yet, permanent revolution has become widespread in many public offices. When every successive wave of externally appointed top civil servants serves for a comparatively shorter period of time in a post, there is little incentive to respect organisational tradition, or invest in the long-term relationships and professional links needed to achieve stability in departments and agencies that form public service ethos. Instead, imposing turmoil in order to ‘make one’s mark shows how personal incentives trump operational necessity, and de-motivates staff (see Figure 2).

This quickening pace of change is encouraging a rapid turnover of staff and policies. Short-term personal and organisational incentives can create a climate for irresponsible performance targets measuring the immediate alteration and superficial results, not the lasting outcome. Senior Civil Servants usually move to new challenges within three years. This is a problem since authoritative evaluation is rarely undertaken. Re-organisers all too often do not stay in a position long enough to see the changes through. Independent research on the effectiveness of PSR is rare. One important exception from 2015 reviewed some thirty years of PSR in the United Kingdom. It concluded that the result was the UK public service ‘cost a bit more and worked a bit worse’. None of the stated objectives for PSR had apparently been achieved.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Bell, S., & Hindmoor, A. (2009). *Rethinking governance: The centrality of the state in modern society*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>46</sup> Thierry, W. et al. (2021). Intergenerational inequities in exposure to climate extremes. *Science*, pp. 158-160.

<sup>47</sup> The World Health Organisation. (2000). *The World Health Report 2000*, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> World Bank. (2022). *The Future of Government: Reimagining Government for Good*. Washington DC.

<sup>49</sup> Davis, J. H., Schoorman, F. D., & Donaldson, L. (1997). Toward a stewardship theory of management. *Academy of Management Review*, 22(1): 20-47.

<sup>50</sup> [https://issuu.com/undppublicserv/docs/politicalsettlements\\_report\\_final](https://issuu.com/undppublicserv/docs/politicalsettlements_report_final)

<sup>51</sup> Hood, C., and R. Dixon. (2015). *A Government that Worked Better and Cost Less? Evaluating Three Decades of Reform and Change in UK Central Government*. New York: Oxford University Press.

**Figure 2. A summary of overlap between good governance and stewardship**

5		<b>Stewardship, Good Governance, and Ethics</b> <i>Policy Brief No.19: Institute On Governance, Ottawa, Canada</i>	
<b>Good Governance Principles (UNDP)</b>	<b>Elements of Effective Stewardship</b> <i>(sources listed on p. 4)</i>		
<b>Participation</b> – all men and women should have a voice in decision-making, either directly or through legitimate intermediate institutions that represent their intention.	}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Full stakeholder involvement” (JNCC)</li> <li>• “The seeking of public engagement in regulatory policy developments” (CFIA)</li> <li>• “Build[ing] coalitions of support from different groups” (WHOa)</li> <li>• “Inclusiveness – ensuring that advice is drawn from many disciplines, all sectors and, when appropriate, international sources” (GC)</li> <li>• “Building public trust” (EPA)</li> <li>• “A willingness to think and partner globally” (GC)</li> </ul>	
<b>Responsiveness</b> – institutions and processes try to serve all stakeholders.			
<b>Consensus orientation</b> – good governance mediates differing interests to reach a broad consensus on what is in the best interest of the group and, where possible, on policies and procedures.			
<b>Effectiveness and efficiency</b> – processes and institutions produce results that meet needs while making the best use of resources.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The negotiation of international principles of safety and guidance, sharing information and providing expertise” (CFIA)</li> <li>• “Monitoring and performance assessment” (WHOb)</li> <li>• “Review – keeping stewardship regimes up to date as knowledge advances” (GC)</li> </ul>	
<b>Accountability</b> – decision-makers in government, the private sector and civil society organizations are accountable to the public, as well as to institutional stakeholders.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “A climate ... that is accountable to the public” (GC)</li> <li>• “Collaborating with our regulatory partners” (EPA)</li> </ul>	
<b>Transparency</b> – transparency is built on the free flow of information. Processes, institutions and information are directly accessible to those concerned with them, and enough information is provided to understand and monitor them.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Transparency and Openness – ensuring that all processes are transparent, and that stakeholders and the public are consulted” (GC)</li> <li>• “Ensuring transparency of the decision-making process” (EPA)</li> <li>• “Generation of intelligence (intelligence contributes to more informed decisions)” (WHOb)</li> </ul>	
<b>Rule of Law</b> – legal frameworks should be fair and enforced impartially, particularly the laws on human rights.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “A climate ... that is predictable” (GC)</li> <li>• “Maintaining consistency and fairness” (EPA)</li> </ul>	
<b>Strategic vision (a)</b> – leaders and the public have a broad and long-term perspective on good governance and human development, along with a sense of what is needed for such development.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Defining the vision and direction of ... policy” (WHOa)</li> <li>• “Formulating strategic policy direction” (WHOb)</li> <li>• “Ensuring a fit between policy objectives and organizational structure and culture” (WHOb)</li> <li>• “Working with a set of clear ... objectives” (JNCC)</li> </ul>	
<b>Strategic vision (b)</b> – There is also an understanding of the historical, cultural and social complexities in which that perspective is grounded.		<i>NO DIRECT PARALLEL</i>	
<b>Equity</b> – all men and women have opportunities to improve or maintain their well-being.			
<i>NO DIRECT PARALLEL</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Sound science” (EPA, GC)</li> <li>• “Early issue identification – anticipating policy issues arising from new knowledge” (GC)</li> <li>• “A strong knowledge base, access to specialized expertise” (GC)</li> <li>• “Greater use of socio-economic assessments” (JNCC)</li> <li>• “Responsible management of risk” (HC)</li> <li>• “Tools for implementation (powers, incentives, sanctions)” (WHOb)</li> <li>• “Exerting influence through regulation and advocacy” (WHOa)</li> <li>• “The ability to set incentives, either directly or in organizational design” (WHOa)</li> </ul>	

Source: Saner, M. and J. Wilson. (2003). *Stewardship, Good Governance and Ethics*. Institute on Governance Policy, Brief No. 19.

Stewardship offers one way to preserve the longer term national and institutional aims in public service, in the face of increasing complexity and ever more turbulent atmosphere post Covid-19, with growing preoccupation for the immediate at the cost of the longer-term interest.

This reinforces the principal-agent theory which assumes people are extrinsically motivated, untrustworthy, and therefore need to be controlled through transactional compliance. Stewardship theory, in contrast, argues that administrators are trustworthy when motivated by intrinsic factors and appropriate levels of autonomy, discretion and accountability. Stewardship tends to be better suited to uncertain and complex conditions.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Schillemans, T. and K. Hagen Bjurström. (2020). Trust and verification: balancing agency and stewardship theory in the governance of agencies, *International Public Management Journal*, 23:5, 650-676.

## New Zealand's Public Service Act of 2020

The most developed articulation of this in any civil service appeared in 2020 when the Parliament of New Zealand passed the Public Service Act replacing the State Sector Act of 1988. Before that, the 2013 amendment to that 1988 Act, the State Sector Amendment Act 2013 set out in legislation for the first time the components of stewardship, and saw the definition spelt out in Section 1A ('Purpose') as "to promote and uphold a State sector system that fosters a culture of stewardship", as well as is imbued with the spirit of service to the community; and operates in the collective interests of government.

Section 4A ('Role of the Commissioner') states "this includes promoting a culture of stewardship in the State services". Section 2 defined stewardship in as "active planning and management of medium- and long-term interests, along with associated advice." Section 32 ('Principle Responsibilities'), describes stewardship as "one of the key accountabilities for chief executives (heads of departments): the stewardship of the department or departmental agency, including of its medium- and long-term sustainability, organisational health, capability, and capacity to offer free and frank advice to successive governments; and the stewardship of assets and liabilities on behalf of the Crown that are used by or relate to (as applicable) the department or agency; and the legislation administered by the department or agency".

This Amendment Act of 2013 put new importance on the concept of stewardship. By the Public Service Act of 2020 New Zealand again went further in implementing stewardship as a central theme of New Zealand's public service reforms. This 'revolution' echoes New Zealand's previous radical New Public Management reforms in 1988.

New Zealand's application of stewardship is lessening the influence of the 1988 Act. Then it proved an important step in revising the New Zealand political settlement, with the country being transformed from a protected, regulated and state-dominated economy, to an open, competitive free-market, under a centre-left Labour Party government. The unintended consequences of that radicalism included fragmentation in and the decline of the public service ethos. The Labour government elected in 1999 pledged to 're-build' the public sector, including through a whole-of-government approach. The 2013 reform took place under the National Party government led by John Key, while the 2020 Act was the work of another Labour government headed by Jacinda Ardern.

Section 11 of the Act defines the public service as supporting "constitutional and democratic government, enables both the current Government and successive governments to develop and implement their policies, delivers high-quality and efficient public services, supports the Government to pursue the long-term public interest, facilitates active citizenship, and acts in accordance with the law".

Stewardship in New Zealand is now established as a principle of the public service. The Public Service Act refers to stewardship under Section 12 where "stewardship" constitutes one of the five public service principles. These principles apply to all parts of the public service (that is, departments, departmental agencies, interdepartmental executive boards, interdepartmental ventures, and Crown agents). Stewardship in the New Zealand public service is led by three central bodies (Treasury, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the Public Service Commission), in promoting and supporting stewardship across the public service.

Stewardship applies to a broad range of functions and capabilities, including of long-term capability and people; institutional knowledge and information; systems and processes; assets; and the legislation administered by agencies. Moreover, the Act requires the public service to "pro-actively promote stewardship". Chief executives are now responsible to the Public Service Commissioner for upholding stewardship when carrying out all responsibilities and functions, and for preparing a long-term insights' briefing report, every three years, on long-term trends.

Under Section 52, the chief executives of departments and departmental agencies are expected to “support” their “Minister to act as a good steward of the public interest”. This includes: “maintaining public institutions, assets, and liabilities”; “maintaining the currency of any legislation administered by their agency”; and “providing advice on the long-term implications of policies”.

In keeping with these provisions, the Public Service Commissioner assesses the quality of stewardship exercised by public service chief executives when reviewing their performance.<sup>53</sup> The Commissioner may also review, as specified in Section 16, the extent to which public service chief executives, public service agencies, and Crown agents are “promoting stewardship” when preparing the new three-yearly briefings of the state of the public service required by the Act. The purpose of these briefings, as specified in the Act, is to “promote stewardship of the public service”.

The Act’s associated Cabinet papers provide three definitions of stewardship: first, “the convention that chief executives act as stewards or caretakers of their department or departmental agency with respect to: its medium- and long-term sustainability, organisational capability, health, and capacity to offer free and frank advice to successive governments; and assets (including legislation and information) and liabilities on behalf of the Crown.”<sup>54</sup>

The second definition states: “active planning and management of medium- and long-term interests, along with associated advice;”<sup>55</sup> and thirdly, “a proactive duty of care for a resource that belongs to or exists for the benefit of others.”<sup>56</sup> The associated Cabinet Paper notes “this duty to promote stewardship is not intended to restrict Ministers’ ability to issue lawful instructions nor to lessen the responsibility of public servants to follow these instructions”.<sup>57</sup>

## **New Zealand reform**

Stewardship may be an emerging trend of public administration and is not unique to New Zealand public service. Yet the centrality of stewardship to recent New Zealand PSR reflects some special factors. New Zealand was able to move first and farthest with the New Public Management (NPM) Reforms, within an emerging paradigm, and may be doing so again (a trend that could be called ‘New Public Stewardship’). Second, in 1988, the Parliament of New Zealand passed the State Sector Act. This legislation was generally regarded as the most comprehensive and theoretically coherent implementation of NPM.<sup>58</sup> The country’s unicameral parliament allowed for ‘democratic dictatorship’ by the political party with a majority, unrestrained by the legislative checks and balances of a second chamber that normally waters down radical reform. Thirdly, stewardship is integral to New Zealand’s political culture, institutionalised because of the country’s ‘political settlement’ in 1840 with the indigenous Maori population, with a culture of stewardship over nature and the environment.

Thirty-five years ago, NPM offered a seemingly logical and innovative methodology for comprehensive systemic change, based on market incentives and principal-agent theory. This warned that managers as agents held goals and interests that might be, and often were, different from, if not contrary to those of shareholders. One result was CEOs were appointed to head up ministries on fixed-term contracts replacing permanent secretaries and becoming the employers of their departments’ staff. NPM held that one weakness of any organisation in either the public or private sector was the ‘principal-agent relationship’. This was core to the dilemmas of public administration: “whenever one individual depends on the action of another, an agency relationship

<sup>53</sup> Under the 2022 Act, the State Services Commissioner became Public Service Commissioner.

<sup>54</sup> State Services Commission 2020, section 27.

<sup>55</sup> State Services Commission 2020, section 88.

<sup>56</sup> State Services Commission 2020, appendix 1.

<sup>57</sup> State Services Commission 2019, recommendation.

<sup>58</sup> Pollitt, C., and Geert Bouckaert. (2011). *Public Management Reform: A Comparative Analysis - New Public Management, Governance, and the Neo-Weberian State*. 3rd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

arises". The result was exploitation by the agent, especially because of information asymmetry since it was all but impossible to make explicit all relevant implicit knowledge.

The fashion for civil service reform around the world after 1988 was greatly influenced by New Zealand. The State Sector Act 1988 sought to make explicit the relationship between ministers and department administrative heads ('chief executives' in New Zealand) to align the incentives of department chief executives (agent) with ministers (principals). Rational individuals will maximise their individual utility at the least cost or effort. Individuals are considered irrational if they are not motivated by personal gain. Mechanisms, rules, and regulations to keep self-serving behaviour in check are often elaborate reward and incentive systems, that applied this market-based insight to the public sector.

Ministers were conceived as having two primary roles: purchaser and owner. The purchaser role meant specifying goods and services to be produced by departments. The ownership role involved acting as a steward of public institutions. A mind-numbing number of formal accountability documents were generated for ministers, who were not particularly interested in their 'ownership' monitoring role, and neither were the parliamentary committees that were supposed to keep them honest. NPM focused on efficiency while glossing over its political integrity. The Public Service Commission's first long-term insights briefing noted the importance of "being clearer about the defects of the New Public Management model of public administration. In particular, the shift from treating citizens as citizens, towards treating them only as consumers".<sup>59</sup>

After twenty-five years in operation, the State Sector Act 1988 was amended in 2013 to include explicit instruction for chief executives to support ministers to be better "owners". Chief executives were responsible to the appropriate ministers for the stewardship of their departments. These responsibilities chief executives owe to ministers to fulfil their responsibilities to Parliament to act as good stewards of the resources they control. In turn, public service stewardship involved a proactive duty of care for implementation without explicit direction or permission from ministers. The inclusion of stewardship in the forthcoming State Sector Act was regarded as so important, that the Chief Archivist lobbied for the 'stewardship of information' to be included in the Public Service Act 2020.<sup>60</sup>

The problem of civil service fragmentation after 1988 led department chief executives to believe that this could be addressed, by building a collective team ethos with their colleagues as the "collective stewards" of the public service. This 'collective stewardship' served to orient the CEOs toward a collective of responsible management and away from short-termism. The Public Service Leadership Team acquired legislative status, for the purpose that "public service chief executives work as a team on the stewardship of the public service as whole".<sup>61</sup> Chief executives continue, however, to have their performance assessed in large part based on their perceived performance as separate stewards, and only then based on their contribution to the team.<sup>62</sup> The New Zealand public service is now required to be evaluated on stewardship performance alongside traditional efficiency and effectiveness criteria.

### **Independent stewardship of the public service**

New Zealand's Cabinet papers identify two purposes for imposing a formal duty of stewardship on the public service, independently of obligations to ministers: first, to "protect and enhance the medium- and long-term capability of the public service to serve successive governments. Because this purpose supports successive governments it is in this respect independent of the Government of the day". The second reason was to "protect the long-term sustainability of New

<sup>59</sup> Enabling Active Citizenship: Public Participation in Government into The Future. Public Service Commission long-term insights briefing. June 2022, p. 56.

<sup>60</sup> State Services Commission 2020, appendix 1.

<sup>61</sup> State Services Commission 2019: Public Service Act 2020 Factsheet.

<sup>62</sup> Hughes, P. (2019). Reinvigorating the public service. Centre for public impact (2021).

Zealand's system of government and support public confidence that this occurs. Because this purpose supports public trust and confidence in public institutions it is in this respect independent of the Government of the day".<sup>63</sup> (Another unspoken aim is to encourage ministers to actively champion the civil service, and to encourage its capacity-building). This element of Stewardship is a duty performed independently of ministers that maintains public institutions for the long-term.

The distinction between supporting ministers with their stewardship role, and acting independently as stewards, is further emphasised as a justification for the absence of political interference in the appointment of public servants: "Chief executives and the Public Service Commissioner are expected to be responsive to the government of the day, but also maintain sufficient independence to serve the long-term interests of the public of New Zealand". This may be realised in different ways by successive governments. Maintaining political neutrality in the appointment of chief executives and the Commissioner is important for effective system stewardship".<sup>64</sup>

"Public service chief executives work as a team on the stewardship of the public service as a whole".<sup>65</sup> The CEOs protect the long-term sustainability of government and support public confidence that this occurs. Because this purpose supports public trust in public institutions, it is in this respect independent of the Government of the day. This element of Stewardship is a duty performed independently of ministers that maintains public institutions for the long-term. The distinction between supporting ministers with their stewardship role, and acting independently as stewards, links the concept of stewardship to the Public Service Commissioner's role in supporting government formation.<sup>66</sup> The Commissioner has a new responsibility for ensuring that all negotiating parties have equal access to the public service as part of coalition negotiations to form a new government. Here stewardship means any duty performed independently of ministers that maintains public institutions for the long-term.

### **The Long-Term Insights Briefings**

A new provision is added by the Act, to provide "strengthened reporting requirements relating to stewardship and sustainability of the public service". These reports, tabled in Parliament, and prepared independently of ministers, are intended to show whether and the extent to which government departments and agencies are acting as stewards, and are managing long-term capability: "The Long-term Insights Briefings require the public service to look over the horizon, for the common good."<sup>67</sup> The purpose of the Long-term Insights Briefings is to: support stewardship by ensuring Public Service departments are thinking about the more complex long-running issues facing society and are exploring skills and actions that might be needed to respond to these issues. The document will probably be produced mid-way through each election cycle (this could occur two years after an election and one year before an election).

The purpose is again stated to be: "The Briefings are think-pieces on the future, not government policy." The requirement to publish a Briefing is a statutory duty on departmental chief executives, independent of ministers. They differ from the advice that the public service provides ministers, or the accountability and planning documents prepared for Parliament. The value of the Briefings is the opportunity to identify and explore the issues that matter for the future well-being of the people of New Zealand. They provide an opportunity to enhance public debate on long-term issues and usefully contribute to future decision making – not only by government but also by Māori, business, academia, not-for-profit organisations, and the wider public.

"The requirement to publish a Briefing is a statutory duty on departmental chief executives, independent of ministers. Chief executives are responsible for maintaining this independence.

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<sup>63</sup> State Services Commission 2019, appendix 1. The regulatory framework of the Public Service.

<sup>64</sup> State Services Commission 2019, paragraph 52.

<sup>65</sup> State Services Commission 2019, paragraph 46

<sup>66</sup> State Services Commission 2019, appendix 1.

<sup>67</sup> Brook Barrington, Head of the Policy Profession, New Zealand.



This means not seeking their minister's input into, or approval of, the subject matter for the Briefing or the content of the Briefing. Even if there are indications that the current government does not wish to focus its attention on a long-term issue, that should not influence the department's decision about what subject matter to include in the Briefing". The Long-term Insights Briefing format is modelled on the Long-term Fiscal Position, a requirement in the Public Finance Act 1989, for the chief executive of the Treasury to prepare an insights' briefing independently of ministers and linked to intergenerational obligations. "The Commissioner must give a briefing to the Minister on the state of the public service at least once every 3 years".

"The purpose of a Briefing is to promote stewardship of the public service". Originally the briefing subject matter was to be selected by the Commissioner and take into account the issues that the Commissioner considered were of significant public interest. The Briefing may include an assessment of "whether and the extent to which the public service is achieving its purpose; public service chief executives, public service agencies, and Crown agents are upholding the public service principles; and public service chief executives, public service agencies, and Crown agents are promoting stewardship of the public service, in particular its long-term capability". The first of the Long-term Insights Briefings was published by the Public Service Commission in 2022. The guidance on Long-term Insights Briefings<sup>68</sup> includes an overview,<sup>69</sup> a Check-list,<sup>70</sup> and a note on Futures thinking.<sup>71</sup>

These insights briefings prepared independently of ministers, have yet to prove their worth, and may suffer the dangers of 'groupthink', with officials second guessing the political acceptability of the stewardship vision for public service, and for the Commissioner to judge whether each ministry and agency has been acting as good stewards.

## Australia

The concept of 'public service stewardship' first gained prominence in Australia and continues. The Productivity Commission describes stewardship as being core to its reform in the delivery of human services in Australia; the Commonwealth Superannuation Corporation identifies stewardship as the crux of the trust relationship with its members; and the Australian Future Fund adopted it to guide its long-term asset strategy. The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet described its role in stewardship terms in 2017, noting particular practices may go against immediate benefit, but produce more effective outcomes for all, over the longer term.

This can be traced back to the 1999 Public Service Act, and to 2013 with the passing of Australia's Public Governance, Performance and Accountability (PGPA) Act. This promoted the Australian Public Service (APS) with stewardship of the capacity to serve successive governments, being efficient, able to manage effectively and trusted by stakeholders:

*"Stewardship involves objective and collective action to ensure the public service delivers the best results for Australians..."*

*Stewardship extends beyond electoral horizons, as the APS champions good governance of public institutions over the medium to long term to advance the interests of Australia and all Australians. The ultimate beneficiaries of APS stewardship are the people of Australia, both now and in the future.*

*Stewardship relates not only to financial sustainability and the effective and efficient management of resources, but also to less tangible factors such as maintaining the trust placed in the APS and building a culture of innovation and integrity in policy advice".<sup>72</sup>*

<sup>68</sup> <https://dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/policy-project/long-term-insights-briefings>

<sup>69</sup> <https://dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-08/long-term-insights-briefings-high-level-overview-aug21.pdf>

<sup>70</sup> <https://dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-08/long-term-insights-briefings-checklist-aug21.pdf>

<sup>71</sup> <https://dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/policy-project/policy-methods-toolbox/futures-thinking>

<sup>72</sup> State of the Services Report 2018–19.

The APS enables government to maintain and enhance the well-being and prosperity of Australians. The Commonwealth Public Service Act 1902 and the Commonwealth Public Service Act 1922 set the legislative framework, and the 1999 PS Act set out the values, rules, and frameworks for an apolitical, efficient, and effective public service.

*“The stewardship role of the Secretaries Board is not separate from the responsibility to serve the government of the day. However, stewardship extends beyond electoral horizons, as the APS champions good governance of public institutions over the medium to long term to advance the interests of Australia and all Australians. The ultimate beneficiaries of APS stewardship are the people of Australia, both now and in the future”.*

The 1999 PS Act also defined the stewardship role of departmental secretaries, who were entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring apolitical, efficient, and effective service for Australians from within departments, and across the APS (through the Secretaries Board).

*“There is to be an Australian Public Service Commissioner, whose duties include ... to partner with Secretaries in the stewardship of the APS; ... The roles of the Secretary of a Department include leader, providing stewardship within the Department and, in partnership with the Secretaries Board, across the APS; ... The Secretaries Board is responsible for the stewardship of the APS”.*

This stewardship role was not separate from the responsibility to serve the government of the day. However, stewardship extended beyond electoral horizons. The “APS champions good governance of public institutions over the medium to long term to advance the interests of Australia and all Australians. The ultimate beneficiaries of APS stewardship are the people of Australia, both now and in the future”.

The Australian PS Act 1999 explained the values, rules, and frameworks for an apolitical, efficient, and effective public service. This PS Act also laid out the stewardship role of departmental secretaries, who were entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring apolitical, efficient, and effective service for Australians from within departments, and across the APS (through the Secretaries Board).

At the institutional level, stewardship involves objective and collective action to ensure the public service delivers the best results for Australians. A key aspect of this is modestly declared to be ‘unwavering focus’ on policy and programme outcomes that deliver public benefit in an effective and efficient manner. As a result, stewardship demanded the public service work more collaboratively on the multifaceted challenges Australia was facing. How effective this has been does not seem to have been subject to independent evaluation.

Stewardship may encourage the provision of frank and fearless advice to government to inform and assist the design and delivery of government priorities, alongside a focus on the governance, sustainability, and productivity of public sector institutions. Ultimately, stewardship provides for accountability to the Australian community that the APS serves.

The stewardship responsibilities of the APS involved having a constant eye to the future of Australia and the future needs of the Australian community, to ensure it remained relevant and well equipped to deliver its role: service to the Government, the Parliament, and the Australian public:

*“The principle of stewardship is critical. In serving the Government, the Parliament and the public, the APS is the steward of numerous legislative, policy, service delivery and management functions. This stewardship role creates current and future responsibilities to the people of Australia, with a need for the APS to provide continuity of purpose and focus on outcomes across changing political climates. At institutional level, stewardship involves objective and collective action*

*to ensure the public service delivers the best results for Australians. ... As a result, in today's context stewardship demands the service work more collaboratively on the multifaceted challenges Australia is facing".*

*"Good stewardship encourages the provision of frank and fearless advice to government to inform and assist the design and delivery of government priorities, alongside a focus on the governance, sustainability, and productivity of public sector institutions. Ultimately, stewardship provides for accountability to the Australian community that the APS serves."*

## First Nation Stewardship

New Zealand has in recent years drawn from the Māori notion of stewardship, the connection of past and future, and spiritual with material (respect for the 'first nation' legacy has also particularly influenced Canadian and Australian legislation). The 2020 reforms "aim to unify the Public Service to fulfil its stewardship responsibility to support the Crown's relationships with the *Māori*".<sup>73</sup>

Stewardship encourages the current generation to nurture the rights and interests of generations yet to be born, by "walking backwards into the future", namely people would expect to pass on the earth in at least as good condition as they had inherited it.

Indigenous peoples are credited with often thinking long-term. Sustainable methods of managing the planet's ecosystems can be found around indigenous populations, including the *Ahupua'a* system in Hawaii, and the *Tapere* land management system in the Cook Islands. The Iroquois in North America notably required their tribal elders to think seven generations ahead (about one hundred and fifty years) to judge whether decisions made today would benefit their descendants seven generations into the future. This 'Seventh Generation Principle' is frequently associated with the modern concept of 'sustainability' but it is broader in context:

*"In every deliberation, we must consider the impact on the seventh generation... even if it requires having skin as thick as the bark of a pine. Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground -- the unborn of the future Nation."<sup>74</sup>*

In 2008, the constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan was revised to explicitly address intergenerational fairness:

*"It is the fundamental duty of every citizen to contribute to the protection of the natural environment [Article 5].*

*The Government shall exercise proper management of the monetary system and public finance. It shall ensure that the servicing of public debt will not place an undue burden on future generations." [Article 14].*

Western Stewardship's focus on effective and efficient use of resources is often contrasted with non-western Stewardship supposed attention to reflecting spiritual, long-term ecological purpose, and sustainable values. This is especially held to be apparent in New Zealand. There the 'first nation', the *Māori* tribes recognised under the core constitutional foundational text, the 1840

**Every Bhutanese is a trustee of the Kingdom's natural resources and environment for the benefit of the present and future generations ...**

*The 2008 Constitution of Bhutan*

<sup>73</sup> State Services Commission. Public Service Legislation overview (2019).

<sup>74</sup> Law 28 of the Iroquois Nation.

Treaty of Waitangi,<sup>75</sup> are held to be *tangata whenua* (primary custodians of any given territory, literally 'people of the land'), and promote the *Māori* concept of *kaitiakitanga*, which translates as stewardship.<sup>76</sup>

As a result, stewardship is embedded in New Zealand's public service reform in a way that is unmatched around the world and, to a significant degree, the concept derives from the New Zealand historical experience. *Kaitiakitanga* variously expresses guardianship, duty of care, resource management, the connection of past and future, and the link between spiritual and material. The word, derived from *tiaki*, has the basic meaning 'to guard', but may also mean to keep, to preserve, to conserve, to foster, to protect, to shelter, to keep watch over; *tiaki* is a "responsibility or obligation rather than a right due to ownership" and failure to carry out *kaitiakitanga* results in a loss of *mana* ('authority, prestige'). A *kaitiaki* is a guardian, keeper, preserver, conservator, foster-parent, protector; and is used for the concept of guarding the sky, the sea, and the land. *Tanga* means guardianship, preservation, conservation, fostering, protecting, and sheltering.

Hence the process and practices of protecting and looking after the environment are referred to as *kaitiakitanga*, which seems to capture the various attributes that express Stewardship in English. The New Zealand government uses 'stewardship' interchangeably with '*kaitiakitanga*' in *Te Reo Māori*, the indigenous tongue and an official language of New Zealand which expresses the world view of the *Māori* people. In the governance partnership between *Māori* and the Crown in New Zealand, *kaitiakitanga* is an important principle determining preferred indigenous ways of protecting resources, exercising duty of care, determining responsibilities, and protecting the interests of the future.

*Kaitiakitanga* shapes how stewardship is conceived in provisions and practices in the New Zealand public administration. Like stewardship, the nuances of *kaitiakitanga* include a wide range of related concepts: resource management and administration; sustainable development; authority from the 'spiritual life-principle'; *tapu* 'sacredness, set apart'; governance and protection. As a result, New Zealand's stewardship is influenced by pre-colonial indigenous governance concepts informed by *Māori* culture, and stewardship by the modern state has come to reflect these traditions and values. Similar to 'stewardship' in English, *Kaitiakitanga* is a balancing concept that "weaves together historical and ancestral, environment with social threads of identity, purpose and practice". Distinctions between spiritual and material are not drawn as starkly as in Western perspectives.<sup>77</sup>

Echoing Edmund Burke, *Kaitiakitanga* has a strong temporal dimension, both backwards and forwards in time: managing relationships between people in the past, present, and future to protect the interests of future generations but also stress the importance of ancestors to tribal identity. Ownership of property was up to 1840 an alien concept, and "the resources of the earth did not belong to man but rather, man belonged to the earth".

The term "stewardship" first appears in the New Zealand statute book via the Conservation Act of 1987, and now appears in 39 Acts of Parliament. Interpretation clauses for *kaitiakitanga*

<sup>75</sup> Under Article Two of the Treaty of Waitangi 1840, "The Queen of England agrees to protect the chiefs, the sub-tribes and all the people of New Zealand in the unqualified exercise of their chieftainship over their lands, villages and all their treasures.". Compare this with, for example, Canada's Indian Act of 1876.

<sup>76</sup> Welch, E., and W. Wong. (1998). "Public administration in a global context: bridging the gaps of theory and practice between western and non-western nations." *Public Administration Review*, 1998: 40-49.

<sup>77</sup> Forster, Margaret. (2011). "Kaitiakitanga: A *Māori* Environmental Ethic." In *Mana Tangata: Politics of Empowerment*, edited by Huia Tomlins-Jahnke and Malcolm Mulholland. Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2011; Kamira, Robyn. "Kaitiakitanga: Introducing Useful Indigenous Concepts of Governance," 499–507. Brunswick East: Royal Australian College of General Practitioners RACGP, 2003; Marsden, *Māori*. "Kaitiakitanga: A Definitive Introduction to the Holistic World View of the *Māori*." In *The Woven Universe: Selected Writings of Rev. Māori Marsden*, 54–73. Otaki: Estate of Rev. Māori Marsden, 2003.

usually refer back to “the ethic of stewardship”, for example: “*Kaitiakitanga* means the exercise of guardianship ... to natural and physical resources; and includes the ethic of stewardship”.<sup>78</sup> Under Section 7 of the RMA, all individuals exercising functions and powers in managing the use, development and protection of natural and physical resources are required to “have particular regard” to *kaitiakitanga*.

“*Kaitiakitanga* means the exercise of guardianship; and, in relation to any fisheries resources, includes the ethic of stewardship based on the nature of the resources ...”.<sup>79</sup> New Zealand’s Ministry for the Environment has been a key proponent of the concept of stewardship within the New Zealand public service, stating in 2010 that their policy goal was “New Zealanders having confidence in, supporting and participating in the wise management, stewardship and sustainability of New Zealand’s oceans” (Ministry for the Environment, 2010, p. 164).

Through the RMA, the concept of *kaitiakitanga* acquired a statutory definition. This was given within the RMA in section 2(1) as “the exercise of guardianship; and in relation to a resource, includes the ethic of stewardship based on the nature of the resource itself”. This was repeated in the Resource Management Amendment Act 1997 as “the exercise of guardianship by ... the ethics of stewardship”. *Kaitiakitanga* features also in public health and environmental management.

### Other First Nation countries

In Australia, the Native Title Act 1993 played a similar role. As the preamble to the Act makes clear, the legislation was intended to:

*“Ensure that Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders receive the full recognition and status within the Australian nation to which history, their prior rights and interests, and their rich and diverse culture, fully entitle them to aspire”.*

In Canada, “Aboriginal rights” (French: *droits ancestraux*) are those rights that indigenous peoples enjoy from their ancestors, for example the right to hunt and fish a particular territory, distinct from “treaty rights” spelt out in agreements between indigenous groups and the State. Both treaty rights and Aboriginal rights are protected by Section 35 in the Canadian Constitution of 1982.

These influences on stewardship reflected the thinking of Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), the pioneering ‘father’ of modern conservation, who believed that land stewardship was rooted in ethics, or the search for a higher meaning: “... that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, animals, or collectively: the land”. Humans are not separate from but are part of and depend upon the natural community, with the duty to care for the community as a whole. Seen in this light, stewardship may become a profound gift for present and future generations.

Article 25 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, enshrines, and protects this profound stewardship for the world’s Indigenous communities:<sup>80</sup>

*“Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard”.*

This concept, by aligning stewardship to particular aspects of fiduciary or managerial responsibility, relies on technical expertise, risk management, and use of scientific evidence. Stewardship “should be independent and autonomous from political influence, so as to provide unbiased

<sup>78</sup> Resource Management Act (RMA) 1991, section 2.

<sup>79</sup> Fisheries Act 1996, section 2.

<sup>80</sup> UN General Assembly, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Resolution A/RES/61/295.

expertise and evaluations”. Stewardship relies on accurate information, appropriately designed performance measures, and reliable, authoritative official statistics. This aligns with the Canadian Government, where ‘responsible stewardship’ meant that “a manager’s decisions should bring together integrated financial and non-financial performance information” (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2003, p. 80).

### **‘Wicked’ problems and System Stewardship**

Public policies only too often fail because of the complexity of context and of the policy-making process. The longer the time horizon, the more complex the problem, the less likely the public service will be able to deliver solutions on its own. The interconnectedness and emergence of complex ‘wicked problems’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, requires building capability now for the benefit of future generations.

Stewardship focuses on long-term outcomes in key policy areas like non-renewable natural resources, education reform, obesity epidemic, changing domestic energy infrastructure and cyber-crime, climate change, rising sea levels, mass migration, global pandemics, and resource depletion - have become so complex that no country alone can address the whole “wicked” problems. This results in an increasing role for government, with the mandate of political stewardship to protect collective welfare. Stewardship requires the balance between individualism at an extreme of minimal state responsibility, and the ‘nanny-state’.

In an increasingly volatile and interconnected world, governments find themselves unable to direct or implement effective responses to complex ‘wicked’ problems’ and re-envisage their current command-and-control role as one of ‘system-stewards’: facilitating and guiding, less providing, or directing.<sup>81</sup>

As a result, public service increasingly sees its role as one of ‘system stewardship’. The nature and outcomes of a policy are often adapted by different stakeholders working together. This system stewardship involves policy makers overseeing the ways in which the policy is being shaped and steered towards politically desired outcomes.<sup>82</sup>

System stewardship provides an important approach to work in complexity across government, recognition that ministers cannot control complex outcomes but can constantly adapt and learn by attending to the relationship in complex systems. System stewards, responsible for the long-term quality, sustainability and outcomes of a service system, work in less transactional, more relational ways.

The changes to governance approaches entailed by these transformations put into question the fundamental assumptions built into the language of leadership. Health stewardship implies a broad responsibility over the functioning of the health system as a whole and ultimately, over the health of the population. Likewise with education, and other sectors. This ambition requires political will.

A humbler approach to leaders’ strategic role in how organisations adapt to their changing environment may mean less focus on individual characteristics at the apex of organisations. Understanding all employees’ role as stewards includes taking a long view, exercising foresight, anticipating risks and opportunities, and acting prudently – in short, demonstrating stewardship.

Stewardship is a collective responsibility, that contrasts with the over-concentration on leadership: leadership is hierarchical and creates a dependent relationship, stewardship is focused on relationships, reciprocity, and participation, a sustainable connection with people.

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<sup>81</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat, Governance, and Institutional Development Division. (2003). *The Canadian Experience of Public Sector Management Reform (1995-2002)*. Commonwealth Secretariat.

<sup>82</sup> Hallsworth, M. (2011). “System Stewardship: The Future of Policy Making? Working Paper.” London: Institute for Government.

Stewardship offers the opportunity to consider how far to abandon leadership in favour of partnership, empowerment, and service, maintaining accountability without control or compliance. The OECD identifies leadership capabilities that are necessary to respond to complex policy challenges: values-based leadership, open inclusion, networked collaboration, and organisational stewardship.

Stewardship requires political leaders to find common ground for reform, but a collective leadership tends to be more effective than an individual.<sup>83</sup> The establishment of a senior cadre in public service may have undermined the less hierarchical benefits of stewardship.

Does stewardship require a new statutory basis for public services to reflect their permanence, values, objectives and how these bodies should be run and held to account? The decline in public trust in governments around the world may lead to scepticism concerning the stewardship of public administrators' willingness and ability to earn the public trust by being effective and ethical in carrying out the state's business.

Failure of stewardship involves a lack of care, even if the stewards act technically and procedurally in the correct form: legitimacy resting in stewardship requires that efficiency and effectiveness be informed by, and subordinated to, ethics: the agent must achieve the principal's interest and welfare, but also be ethical in the process of doing so. These criteria are often in conflict with each other: being a good steward is therefore difficult to achieve.

Stewardship means the active management of ethical decisions and the integrity of others: "in turning a blind eye, stewardship is subverted; trusteeship is abandoned, and institutional corruption sets in".<sup>84</sup>

### **New Public Stewardship?**

Agency theory (see Figure 1) assumes employees to be individualistic, opportunistic, and self-serving. Alternatively, stewardship depicts subordinates as collectivist, pro-organisational, and trustworthy.<sup>85</sup>

Stewards focus on intrinsic rewards, such as opportunities for personal growth, professional achievement, and self-actualisation (see Figure 2). Stewards tend to be more committed to the organisation's longevity and values over a longer period of time and have broader value bases and a belief in the goals of the organisation.<sup>86</sup>

The major distinction is between extrinsic versus intrinsic motivations. A steward as someone who acts selflessly, reflects a competing view of human motivation as by nature altruistic. Stewardship assumes a self-actualising view of people rather than a self-serving one, to foster policy and learning abilities. It values personal, organisational, and societal development, and promotes long term perspectives (see Figure 1).

Stewardship retains formal accountability with a renewed emphasis on normative concepts:

*"Stewardship turns less on delineating the bounds of stewards' responsibilities, than on their having the right motivation and values – such as respect, altruism, self-sacrifice, caring, humility, collaboration, and moral courage.*

**'New Public Stewardship'  
Reaction to limitations of  
New Public Management.**

<sup>83</sup> Brown, A. (2014). The Myth of the Strong Leader.

<sup>84</sup> World Health Organisation, 2000, p. 121.

<sup>85</sup> Albanese, R., M. T. Dacin, and I. C. Harris. (1997). "Agents as Stewards". *Academy of Management Review* 22(3): 609–11.

<sup>86</sup> Scott, R. (2019). "Service, Citizenship, and the Public Interest: New Public Service and Our Public Service Reform." SSC Discussion Paper, 1–33.

*Stewardship can strengthen transparency, with clarity on how decisions are made, and programmes are evaluated. Stewardship developed from traditional fiduciary governance arrangements, conceived as a principal-agent relationship, in that, stewards “remain accountable to the public as a whole”.*

‘Ethical stewardship’ occurs, where officials earn trust by demonstrating their commitment to stewardship. Learning organisations require cultures and systems in which employees help shape the future of the workplace.

“The stewardship responsibility reinforces that officials administer their departments on behalf of current and future ministers and ultimately all citizens. The responsibility requires chief executives to plan actively and manage for the medium and long-term interests” and should leave departments in better shape than when they took office.<sup>87</sup>

### **Political economy of stewardship**

Examples of future oriented public services that have not so far embraced stewardship but offer good examples for the importance of the quality of public service include Singapore. This island city-state is noted for being impartial, responsive, and innovative, working for the betterment of the nation, with the public good at heart. Others are the public sector in the Nordic region, with emphasis on public service motivation, professional work values and competence. In the Nordic countries, public officials play a key role in building trust and social cohesion.

**“We are borrowing the future from our grandchildren”.**

Ireland has the Programme for Partnership Government, “to empower front-line service providers to make more decisions, ensure more accessible public services, encourage more collaboration between public sector bodies and reward public service innovation and change”. It will enable delivery of the reform commitments outlined in the Public Service Stability Agreement 2018-2020.<sup>88</sup>

The civil service requires a revived sense of an effective and honest state, to implement government programmes while maintaining the long-term viability of government institutions. This would make clear the stewardship obligation on all public officials to act as stewards of the state. Ministers should set out a positive vision for the future of the civil service and refrain from populist attacks on the institution (that exists to carry out ministers’ business) in order to revive confidence and lead to more mutual political/administrative respect.

The civil service at its best creates the longer-term stewardship of the state while ministers ensure that the executive maintains political control of the bureaucracy: “is time to establish a stronger notion of stewardship for the civil service. Acting under democratic control but with a statutory responsibility for the long-term health of the state is entirely consistent with a thriving and plural democracy ... If the civil service’s response to an exceptionally testing period is to enhance its capability to act as stewards of the state that will benefit future governments whatever their political colour, and ultimately the citizens they represent.”<sup>89</sup>

Stewardship is a work-in-progress, incomplete and never a subject of satisfied complacency or comfort, and so is a responsibility undertaken without a minister’s explicit direction or permission. Improving capacities is therefore not a matter of efficiency and effectiveness. Rather, it is essential for governments to be better equipped to cope with the future.

<sup>87</sup> Foreman, Madeleine. (2016). “Working Paper 2016/01: History of Strategy Stewardship in the New Zealand Public Service 1980–2016”. Wellington: McGuinness Institute.

<sup>88</sup> Our Public Service 2020.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas, A. (2022). After Boris Johnson: What Now for The Civil Service? 2022. The Institute for Government.



The World Health Organisation (WHO) adopted the concept of stewardship to describe responsible public health systems:

*“Governments should be the ‘stewards’ of their national resources, maintaining and improving them for the benefit of their populations. In health, this means being ultimately responsible for the careful management of their citizens’ well-being. Stewardship in health is the very essence of good government”.*<sup>90</sup>

**Figure 3. Possible outcomes on public service stewardship**

<p><b>PS long term focus, Ministers short term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ PS thwarted by political election cycle.</li> <li>▶ Ministers disagree with PS about choice of themes for long-term interests Briefings.</li> <li>▶ No support from political leaders.</li> </ul>	<p><b>PS long term, Ministers long term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Independent PS prepares future interests Briefings.</li> <li>▶ Support from political leadership.</li> <li>▶ ‘Ownership’ of public institutions.</li> <li>▶ PS and government collaborate, e.g., Ireland Public Service Stability Agreement 2018-2020.</li> </ul>
<p><b>PS short term, Ministers short term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Politicians and officials constantly fire- fighting short-term crises.</li> <li>▶ No impartial advice.</li> <li>▶ ‘Blame Game’ ministers use PS as scapegoat.</li> <li>▶ Top officials create ‘Perpetual revolution’ in reorganisation undermining PS.</li> </ul>	<p><b>PS short term, Ministers long term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Political support for long term PS.</li> <li>▶ PS lack sense of purpose.</li> </ul>

The government’s role in environmental stewardship is the sustainability of common resources held in trust for the common good in perpetuity. ‘Ecosystem stewardship’ aims at reducing vulnerability, enhancing adaptive capacity, and increasing resilience, while ‘earth stewardship is the reconciliation of ecological management with social equity, to address “unequal power relationships, exclusionary institutional arrangements, inequitable and unjust economic strategies”.

How far, however, does Stewardship now permeate the New Zealand public administration? The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet leads the policy profession, and therefore has overall leadership for the stewardship of policy advice. But the Public Service Commissioner leads the public service and convenes the Public Service Leadership Team (the collective stewards of the public service).

The Public Service Commission and other central agencies provide guidance to public servants on “stewardship” as one of the five core public service principles, as apply to all parts of the public service to “pro-actively promote stewardship” and sets out the broad aims of public service stewarding, as “long-term ... maintaining public institutions, assets, and liabilities” and “providing advice on the long-term implications of policies”.

Even in effective democracies, however, institutions are at present trusted by less than half of their citizens, including by only 46 percent in Germany, 45 percent in Spain, 44 percent in the UK and 43 percent in the U.S.<sup>91</sup>

The split in stewardship responsibilities – where the public service supports ministers with their stewardship obligations, while ministers have a reciprocal duty to steward the public service,

<sup>90</sup> World Health Organisation, 2000, p. 117.

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2022-trust-barometer>

which then has separate and distinct stewardship obligations of its own – presents political challenges for stewardship. Public servants have long imagined themselves as having a tutelary role. The Public Service Act confirms this but does so not as a way to thwart ministers. However, independent stewardship duties may prove naive: what happens when political imperatives are short term, but stewardship explicitly long-term?

Stewardship is tricky in practice, as the immediate and urgent crowd out the strategic and long-term, while agreeing the focus of stewardship requires trade-offs on what matters to the long-term public interests and different perspectives.

Another stewardship role of ministers should be to foster the civil service, not use it as a convenient ‘fall guy’ when things go wrong, through strengthening the accountability for the collective stewardship through collective work-plans, letters of expectations, performance expectations, contractual obligations, and annual reports. Senior civil servants and the public service (that is the central administration) everywhere are powerful and need to be won over to support the ruling elite coalition at least passively.<sup>92</sup> Such political settlements shape the quality of public service provision, the quality of the bureaucracy, the competence of civil servants, the independence of the civil service from political pressures, and the credibility of the government’s commitment to stewardship.

### **Steward of Tradition**

Stewardship looks forward, but also links the past with the present. This requires an informed knowledge of history, to be able to understand the larger context of the ‘ever-changing past’. Stewardship should be grounded in historical awareness and sensitivity, encourage public servants to think in historical terms, to interpret the impacts of global transformations and societal dynamics, long-term trends, and technological revolutions.

Stewardship of the past, the capability to provide historical insight, to identify better the causes of past policy failings in order to preserve the best for long-term public interests. The “steward” has a role in “conserving” valued institutions against debilitating change for change’s sake.

In August 2022, US President Joe Biden consulted a small group of historians to consider the historical parallels to, and lessons for, current threats and opportunities facing the US.<sup>93</sup> Comparisons were made to the years before the 1860 election when Abraham Lincoln warned that a “house divided against itself cannot stand” and the lead-up to the 1940 election, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt battled rising domestic sympathy for European fascism and resistance to the United States joining World War II, to mobilise ‘the soul of America.’ One participant was Sean Wilentz, a professor of American history at Princeton, previously tasked with helping Hillary Clinton understand where and how her potential administration, and her husband Bill Clinton, fitted into historical trends over the last half-century.

A rare developing country parallel occurred at almost the same time, with the Vietnamese President *Nguyễn Xuân Phúc* holding a meeting with the Vietnam Association of Historical Sciences in *Hà Nội*. He stressed the importance of a good understanding of history – not only Vietnamese but also regional and global and set a vision for the country to develop prestigious historical research.

In the UK, civil servants are nowadays so ignorant about Britain’s colonial past that the Home Office has devised a training module designed to instruct officials about the legacy of the empire. Imaginative new approaches are required to encourage civil servants to think in terms of the dynamics of history.<sup>94</sup> Stewardship has become overwhelmingly focused on the future not past, with the “capability to provide future focused research, evaluation and analysis”, rather than to preserve the best from times past for long-term public interests.

<sup>92</sup> [https://issuu.com/undppublicserv/docs/politicalsettlements\\_report\\_final](https://issuu.com/undppublicserv/docs/politicalsettlements_report_final)

<sup>93</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/08/10/biden-us-historians-democracy-threat/>

<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, New Zealand does maintain a site for the history of its public administration: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/keyword/public-service>

## Futures

Rather than extrapolating the future from the past or projecting current conditions into the future, strategic foresight considers the range of possible futures and then explores the implications. ‘Foresight’ is a skill in which public service should know how it works, how to maximise its impact and implications, and how to do it well. This brings into focus disruptive change and surprises that could arise.

Futures thinking provides techniques for thinking about the drivers of change that are shaping the future and exploring their implications for today’s decisions.<sup>95</sup> The aim of futures thinking is not to predict the future, but by exploring the range of possible futures be better prepared for what may unfold, test assumptions, and make decisions that actively shape the desired future.<sup>96</sup>

Given the assumed longevity of the nation-state, governments require the long-term view, and increasingly use strategic foresight to build their capability in order to achieve this. Strategic foresight is a critical tool for engaging with the complexity and uncertainty. It creates an explicit and otherwise easily overlooked step in the strategic planning process in which decision-makers’ assumptions about the future can be challenged. It helps to ensure that thinking about the future is structured and systematic, explicit and evidence-based.

Strategic foresight is capable of providing quality advice on longer-term, future opportunities, challenges and resources. It is necessary to allocate sufficient resources to enable future-focused research, analysis and evaluation beyond the immediate policy priorities and preferences of the government of the day.

Rather than extrapolating the future from the past or projecting current conditions forward into the future, strategic foresight considers the range of possible futures and then explores the implications for the present. This approach brings into focus disruptive change and shocks that could arise. It provides a range of techniques for thinking about the drivers of change that are shaping the future and exploring their implications for today’s decisions. The aim of foresight thinking is not to predict the future but, by exploring the range of possible futures, be better prepared to actively shape the desired future.<sup>97</sup>

The politics of stewardship is often tricky in practice as, from day-to-day, the immediate and urgent crowd out the long term. As well as the challenge of safeguarding resources to conduct longer-term thinking, identifying the focus of stewardship work requires trade-offs and debate on what matters to the long-term public interest. It involves considering a range of interests from different perspectives.

The political process reflects multiple long-term interests, often in tension with “providing advice on the long-term implications of policies”, to support “the Government to pursue the long-term public interest,” but this once again links this interpretation of stewardship to the long-term public interest. This statutory obligation, on chief executives to be good stewards and promote stewardship, means unelected and politically neutral public servants are responsible for a tutelary obligation. This could be interpreted as concern or reality check about the lack of incentives for long-termism by politicians.

Policy stewardship requires keeping an eye on current issues that may not have received adequate consideration and making space in the strategic policy work to explore those issues that may have significant implications for the long-term public interest. This means having the capability and capacity to interpret the underlying drivers of change to identify and test assumptions about

<sup>95</sup> <https://dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/policy-project/policy-advice-themes/stewardship>

<sup>96</sup> <https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/assets/SSC-Site-Assets/SAPG/Stewardship-streams-in-New-Zealand-public-administration.pdf>

<sup>97</sup> Global Centre for Public Service Excellence. (2015). Stewardship Of the Future. Singapore.

the future; test the suitability of the policy intervention in a range of futures and develop policy advice that is fit for the future.

Stewardship may reflect “administrators’ willingness and ability to earn the public trust by being an effective and ethical agent in carrying out the state’s business”. Failure of stewardship involves acts that are unjust or that are procedurally accurate: “legitimacy resting in stewardship requires that efficiency and effectiveness be informed by, and subordinated to, the ethical norms of justice and beneficence”. The most important – and with the most impact – activities are forward-looking, like strategic planning. These activities help create the future:

*“Stewardship could encompass building a service that is committed to the public interest, a service that is a repository of wisdom and experience and maintains the capability and core expertise to serve successive governments, and a service that is self-critical and builds and sustains genuine partnerships”.*<sup>98</sup>

This report recommended that core principles governing the APS’s actions be enshrined in legislation: apolitical, openness, integrity, adherence to merit, and stewardship.

Stewardship can develop common meaning and understanding, to foster a trust-based collaboration with and among a range of subject matter experts across their organisations.

*“Stewards are trustworthy leaders who are motivated by intrinsic factors and are best supported by enabling organisational structures which delegate appropriate levels of autonomy, discretion and accountability.”*

Through identification with an organisation, its mission, vision, and objectives, stewards tend to engage in cooperative, altruistic activities. They are committed to the organisational survival and values over long period of time and have broad ethical bases and a belief in the goals of the organisation. Stewards tend to internalise success and failure and feel responsible for outcomes, whereas agents externalise problems and avoid blame.<sup>99</sup>

Under the Public Service Act 2020, chief executives are required to pro-actively promote stewardship of the public service. As stewards of the system, chief executives are responsible for collaborating and exerting their influence in a cohesive way across boundaries and ensuring their staff have both the authority and motivation to do likewise, in stewardships of relationships, partnerships and collaborations that self-manage and self-regulate important aspects of management.

### **The long-term public interest**

The New Zealand’s State Sector Act 1988 was amended in 2013 by the State Sector Amendment Act to include explicit instruction for chief executives to support ministers more effectively. Chief executives were responsible to the appropriate minister for:

*“The stewardship of the department [...] including of its medium- and long-term sustainability, organisational health, capability, and capacity to offer free and frank advice to successive governments; and the stewardship of assets and liabilities on behalf of the Crown that are used by or relate to [...] the department; [...] and the legislation administered by the department”.*

The 2013 State Sector Amendment Act stated that the purpose of the 1988 State Sector Act was

<sup>98</sup> Our Public Service, Our Future. Independent Review of the Australian Public Service. Commonwealth of Australia 2019, pp. 91–102.

<sup>99</sup> Karl Hagen Bjurstrøm. (2020). Principal–Agent or Principal–Steward: How Ministry–Agency Relations Condition the Impact of Performance Management in the Steering of Government Agencies, *Public Performance & Management Review*, 43:5, 1053-1077.

to promote and uphold a State sector system that had eight facets: these included the spirit of service to the community; and operates in the collective interests of government; and maintains appropriate standards of integrity and conduct; and maintains political neutrality; ... is driven by a culture of excellence and efficiency; and fosters a culture of stewardship.”<sup>100</sup> Section 2, inserted in 2013, on interpretation, states that stewardship means active planning and management of medium- and long-term interests, along with associated advice.

### **Responsible for stewardship**

The chief executive of a department or departmental agency is responsible to the appropriate minister for the departments or agencies carrying out the purpose of this Act; and the departments’ or agencies’ responsiveness on matters relating to the collective interests of government; and the stewardship of the departments or agencies, including of its medium- and long-term sustainability, organisational health, capability, and capacity to offer free and frank advice to successive governments; and the stewardship of assets and liabilities on behalf of the Crown that are used by or relate to (as applicable) the departments or agencies; and the legislation administered by the departments or agencies.

Stewardship reinforces free and frank advice, as public servants need to provide advice based on the best policy and evidence consistent with the longer-term vision.<sup>101</sup>

Long-term public interests may divide between politicians and officials on future issues beyond the immediate policy priorities and preferences of the government of the day may depend on the electoral cycle. The Treasury’s factsheet about the State Sector and Public Finance Reform Act 2012 stated:

*“The stewardship responsibility reinforces that chief executives administer their departments on behalf of others, notably current and future Ministers and ultimately all New Zealanders. The responsibility requires chief executives to plan actively and manage for the medium and long-term interests. This applies to a whole range of things including departmental sustainability, organisational health, capability, the capacity to offer free and frank advice, the stewardship of assets and liabilities on behalf of the Crown and legislation administered by the department. Ultimately, a chief executive should leave the department in better shape than when he or she took office”.*<sup>102</sup>

The purpose of the 2013 Act was to promote and uphold a state sector that is imbued with the spirit of service to the community; and operates in the collective interests of government; maintains appropriate standards of integrity and conduct; maintains political neutrality; ... is driven by a culture of excellence and efficiency; and fosters a culture of stewardship.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Section 1A: inserted, on 18 July 2013, by section 5 of the State Sector Amendment Act 2013 (2013 No 49); repealed, on 7 August 2020, by section 132(1) of the Public Service Act 2020 (2020 No 40).

<sup>101</sup> State Services Commission. New Zealand’s Public Service Reforms for You, The People of New Zealand: Reform of the State Sector Act 1988: Directions and Options for Change (September 2018).

<sup>102</sup> Treasury, 2013: 2.

<sup>103</sup> The Cabinet paper on the 1988 Act did not single out the concept of stewardship for explicit mention as part of the Commissioner’s role. At that stage, the dimensions of stewardship were considered to be included in the combined concepts of the design, capability and performance of the State services. However, during the process of legislative drafting (to insert a definition of “stewardship”; and to describe the stewardship responsibility of chief executives) it became clear that stewardship constituted such a pivotal concept that it required explicit mention within the Commissioner’s role. Accordingly, the Introduction Bill included as part of the Commissioner’s leadership role “promoting a culture of stewardship in the State services”.

## System-stewards

*Stewardship is ultimately concerned with oversight of the entire system.*<sup>104</sup>

Governments have to develop stewardship in response to longer-term problems. They struggle to work on a time horizon beyond the next election cycle. In a world of long-term global threats, serious – even existential – challenges like climate change can be insufficiently addressed, resulting in chronic under-investment in future capabilities in developing human capital through education or health; in domestic infrastructure; and in the ability to project power internationally.

Complex problems can be tackled using processes that are systemic, emergent, and participatory, that will require a transition to system stewardship to become more accountable and open, coherent, and future-focused civil service as a ‘custodian’ or ‘guardian’ of the public value of a fair policy-making process.

This also requires a re-evaluation of the kinds of skills, capabilities and leadership needed from both politicians and officials. The key uncertainty is whether governments are able to develop a working 21<sup>st</sup> Century concept of themselves and their relations with the wider network of social actors that is more appropriate for their environment.

This purpose of government is to facilitate the implementation of effective long-term and coherent strategies to promote citizens’ well-being, enhance security and foster prosperity, while remaining legitimate through performance, competence, and accountability to their citizens. Within a networked, complex environment, government acts as the Future-conscious steward. Governments need to make longer-term strategic decisions to cope with and adapt to uncertain environments. They have to overcome pressures to crisis management, responding to the demands of round-the-clock media coverage, and instead develop longer-term strategies to tackle “wicked problems”.

Using strategic foresight is the goal for achieving longer-term and future-focused stewardship. Strategic foresight helps decision makers think systematically about the future, explicitly and evidence-based, to understand complexity, build resilience, set direction, and then implement. Strategic foresight can contribute to emergent or participative approaches. It is also an important component in supporting or framing the dialogue on the narrative of the future of a country (e.g., ‘Our Singapore Conversation’).

The purpose and value of strategic foresight is to enable stewardship to succeed, by building the foundations for greater understanding and dialogue. The purpose is to develop new ideas about stewardship and the role of government, both in order to ensure our age leaves a better legacy for the next generation, and to drive internal reform to create governance structures that are fit for purpose in the uncertain world of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

*“... the state is an ethically motivated representative of the popular will and the common interest. ...”*

## Impartiality

Quality of stewardship depends on the ‘political settlement’, the political/administrative interface and the public service bargain.<sup>105</sup> Top civil servants have a crucial function in the management of the civil service. This role has been challenged as a result of recent administrative reforms. Managerial and technical reforms, however, also have institutional aspects that impact on the statutory systems and on the power relations between senior civil servants and their ministers.

From the ‘night-watchman’ state, which is entrusted with the minimal enforcement of law and

<sup>104</sup> World Health Organisation (2000), p. 36.

<sup>105</sup> T. Kelsall et al. (2022). Political Settlements and Development.

order, to the interventionist “nanny” state, governments attempt to regulate and provide incentives to improve the allocation of resources according to ideology and political support and influence social behaviour.<sup>106</sup>

Public service inherits not only tangible resources and formal functions of governments (legislation, regulation, enforcement) as constituted political authorities, but also informal shared values, collective norms, common practices. The power of the state can constrain the individual for the common good.

Stewardship reflects a social contract built on public officials’ intrinsic motivation (loyalty, patriotic not nationalist pride, collective). The OECD (2020) *Survey on Public Service Leadership and Capability* identified concern for the common good as a key attribute for legitimating the state while making the public service an attractive employer.

The WHO’s *World Health Report 2000* took a pioneering look at public stewardship. It noted that:

*“A large part of stewardship consists of regulation, whether undertaken by the government or by private bodies which regulate their members, often under general rules determined by government ... Legislation brings about changes that individuals on their own cannot set new standards for the public good... as a form of ‘stewardship’.”*<sup>107</sup>

Stewardship is a concept whose normative basis is that the state operates ‘systems’ for the good of citizens,<sup>108</sup> in a political setting that lies between “rugged individualism” and the “nanny” state:

*The positive dimensions of stewardship are predominantly tied to its potential for improving policy outcomes... while focusing the policy process on traditional principal-agent relationships can create an efficient state, it is possible to create a state that is not only efficient but good by emphasising normative, ethically oriented expectations of stewardship.*

Stewardship reflects a communitarian, pluralist, democratic theory of the state, in which citizens put trust in both the sound judgment and the good faith of the state.

## **Stewardship and welfare**

*Stewardship means that liberal states have responsibilities to look after important needs of people both individually and collectively. ... stewardship gives expression to the obligation on states to seek to provide conditions that allow people to be healthy.*

Democratic states take seriously these stewardship responsibilities. While there is general agreement that a ‘state stewardship role’ exists for governments, there is disagreement about its basis and content, with paternalism as:

*“Interference of a state with a person, against their will, and justified by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm: often what is perceived to be good for another is enforced against that person’s will, and it is precisely this overriding of individuals’ wills that makes acts of paternalism problematic”.*

Stewardship offers an alternative to top-down management, in prioritising long-term organisational

<sup>106</sup> Calman K. (2009). Beyond the ‘nanny state’: stewardship and public health. *Public Health*. 2009 123: 6–10.

<sup>107</sup> Op cit. p. 35.

<sup>108</sup> E.g., The World Bank’s System Strengthening Programme for Results Project in Samoa: see above.

and stakeholder collective interests ahead of self-interest. Barriers to stewardship include organisational rigidity in the promotion system; lack of support for risk-taking; focus on output over employee well-being; dis-empowering work practices; unclear objectives, roles, and accountabilities; lack of incentives for fostering collaboration. Stewardship means focusing on the common goal (that is, long-term welfare); looking beyond narrowly defined targets to focus on organisational goals over individual work tasks or career advancement.<sup>109</sup>

It involves ensuring that entrusted resources are used effectively in the public service and trying to increase their value for the next generation, and the common good, so the performance agreement behaviours consistent with stewardship put emphasis on long-term outcomes, incentives for co-operation and collective achievements.

Canadian federal public servants are entrusted to use and care for public resources responsibly, for both the short term and long term. Public servants shall use resources responsibly by:

*Effectively and efficiently using the public money, property and resources managed by them; considering the present and long-term effects that their actions have on people and the environment; and acquiring, preserving, and sharing knowledge and information as appropriate.*<sup>110</sup>

Canada's Public Sector Code lists five values: respect for democracy, respect for people, integrity, excellence, and stewardship. This last value means that Federal public servants are entrusted to use and care for public resources responsibly, for both the short term and long term, by effectively and efficiently using the public money, property and resources managed by them; considering the present and long-term effects that their actions have on people and the environment; acquiring, preserving, and sharing knowledge and information as appropriate.

## Wales

Although the term "stewardship" has rarely been used in the United Kingdom, committees in the UK's House of Commons and independent inquiries have been pressurising ministers in effect, to accept that they have "stewardship" duties in respect of "their" departments.<sup>111</sup>

The call for stewardship role of Ministers led to the demand that a training programme for Ministers, and aspiring Ministers, be prepared to give insight into the workings of the civil service.<sup>112</sup>

In the UK, government has yet to think systematically about how its role and ways of working must adapt.<sup>113</sup> The UK is still undecided on the question as to whether the legitimacy of the public service springs from the immediate will of the people, so that officialdom depends on the last electoral success of the government. Or does the civil service have a separate and distinct duty of care to the future, for preparing future governments to be fit for purpose?

*"A civil service statute would help, giving the civil service an explicit role in maintaining the capability of UK governments, under the direction of and accountable to the Civil Service Board, to manage risks and respond to crises. The*

<sup>109</sup> Hughes, P. (2019). View of Public Service Legislation and Public Service Reform.

<sup>110</sup> Values and Ethics Code of the Department of Justice 2022. <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cp-pm/vec-cve/c1.html>

<sup>111</sup> Thomas, A. (2022). After Boris Johnson: What now for the civil service? The Institute for Government.

<sup>112</sup> All Select Committee Publications: Commons Select Committee on Public Administration: Public Administration 2017.

<sup>113</sup> One notable exception was the 2020 Ditchley Annual Lecture given by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove, on "The privilege of public service". He has announced his intention to abandon his political career at the next general election, thereby avoiding having to apply for the Stewardship of the Chiltern Hundreds.



*head of the civil service and their permanent secretary colleagues would need to take their statutory responsibility seriously... to maintain the capability of the state”.*<sup>114</sup>

As Matthew Rycroft, the UK’s Home Office Permanent Secretary, argued:

*“it’s for us actually within the civil service to be stewards and to think about our own role in terms of the leadership of the organisation of the civil service”.*<sup>115</sup>

However, in one part of the UK, some progress has been achieved. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, established by the devolved legislature, aims to ensure that all

*“Public bodies take account of the long-term, help to prevent problems occurring or getting worse, take an integrated and collaborative approach, and considers and involves people of all ages”.*<sup>116</sup>

The Act created the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales to help public bodies consider the long-term effects of their decisions.

This defines sustainable stewardship as that public service “must act in a manner which seeks to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

*“To act in that manner, the public service must take account of the importance of balancing short term requirements with the ability to meet long term needs, especially where action taken to meet short term needs may have detrimental long term effect; to take an integrated approach, by considering how well-being objectives may impact upon each of the well-being goals; contradictory objectives, where steps taken may contribute to meeting one objective but may be detrimental to meeting another; and the importance of involving other persons with an interest in achieving the well-being goals and of ensuring those persons reflect the diversity of the population”.*

The collective, social contract feeds public servants’ stewardship altruism, ‘public service intrinsic motivation’ (see Figure 1), or as ‘a spirit of service to the community’.<sup>117</sup> Stewardship responsibilities is where the public service supports ministers with their stewardship obligations, but then has separate and distinct stewardship obligations of their own.

## **The Future and The Past**

The climate change challenge requires governments around the world to protect the long-term interests, fairness and sustainability of future generations and voters yet to be born in mind, to have the capacity and vision to take decisions or actions today that are informed by the past and by foresight, to ensure that societies will not be collectively better off in the future than would otherwise have been.

Stewardship as inter-generational obligation involves investing today in assets (physical or intellectual capital), in risk management, or in policies. And of course, in people and institutions.

<sup>114</sup> Alex Thomas, Rhys Clyne, Madeleine Bishop, and Alice Lilly. (2022). A New Statutory Role For The Civil Service. The Institute for Government.

<sup>115</sup> Rayner G, ‘Senior civil servant accused of trying to thwart Government’s anti-woke agenda’, The Telegraph, 4 June 2021.

<sup>116</sup> The Welsh Government. (2016). Shared purpose: shared future: Statutory guidance on the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, p. 3.

<sup>117</sup> Public Service Act 2020, section 13.

That means chief executives must think not only about matters affecting our departments and the government of the day, but also the long-term health of organisations, the legislation departments administer, the collective interests of government, and the ability to provide advice to successive or future governments.

### **What will success look like?**

It sounds simple, but stewardship is hard. Taking decisions for the future is, by definition, uncertain. Both the benefits and risks may or may not materialise, whereas costs are incurred upfront.

“Stewardship” in New Zealand is so far silent on the results. How should stewardship be assessed? The Public Service Commissioner will be due to assess the quality of stewardship exercised by public service chief executives when reviewing their performance. The Commissioner may also - as specified in Section 16 - review the extent to which public service chief executives, public service bodies, and Crown agents are advancing stewardship when preparing the new three-yearly briefings to “promote stewardship of the public service”. But will statutory requirements of this nature threaten to make it more difficult to ring fence the public service (and, in particular the post of PS Commissioner) from political interference?

One of the core purposes of the public service is to support “the Government to pursue the long-term public interest” (Section 11) but what precisely constitutes the “long-term public interest”? Societies have multiple interests, often competing, which form the basis of political contestation.

The concept of stewardship has a long history in both indigenous and colonial tradition. Does this require greater historical awareness of how stewardship has been linked to “guardianship” and “trusteeship” institutions, the exercise of “fiduciary duties”, and the *Māori* concept of *kaitiakitanga*, the careful management of the resources, and systems of governance?

With the world facing grave existential threats, good stewardship is ever more critical. Accordingly, public officials must be empowered and incentivised to look beyond the immediate horizon, be alert to emerging risks, identify how best to safeguard the interests of future generations, and grapple with the demands of inter-generational fairness.

Does intrinsic motivation lessen the preoccupation with leaders to motivate officials to work towards the goals, with opportunities to make a difference and participate in improvement and innovation? The major distinction is between extrinsic versus intrinsic motivations, with a steward as a servant who acts selflessly. These questions themselves go to the heart of effective public leadership and organisational stewardship. In the public sector, stewardship has been captured by being claimed as strongly tied to leadership and responsibilities.<sup>118</sup>

The media cycle is constant, and relentless. Success is measured in clicks that reward headlines more than thoughtful critique. The crisis of confidence in public institutions requires national reputation develop from long investment in doing things right – even when short term expediency would have been an easier path.

A key stewardship challenge is to maintain the focus on building a trusted, respected, honest public service, while ministers value the provision of free, frank, and fearless advice. Public service must guard its reputation for political neutrality, and continue to demonstrate the value of independent, merit-based appointments.

The relationship with Ministers is one of the key enablers – or critical constraints - on the ability of the public service to undertake independent stewardship. The relationship between public servants and ministers is the Cabinet Secretary as the arbiter on to central government decision-

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<sup>118</sup> Caldwell, C., L. Hayes, R. Karri, and P. Bernal. (2008). “Ethical Stewardship: Implications for Leadership and Trust”. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 78, no. 1/2: 153–64.

making for ministers, their offices, and those working within government. The public service must be prepared to undertake this stewardship in full view of the minister of the day and be prepared to discuss the trade-offs.

The Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 in the United Kingdom placed the civil service on a statutory footing. The Government was required to publish civil service codes of conduct that articulate the public service principles of honesty and integrity, objectivity, and impartiality, but not yet a system stewardship role incumbent on public servants embedded in policy communities. This form of stewardship, as a learning process, can foster constructive dialogue and debate, while looking beyond individual stakeholders to consider collective interests. Stewardship may evolve as the willingness and ability to earn the trust of citizens by being effective at long-term learning on complex ‘wicked’ problems.

As ministers are responsible for decisions on spending, it will be essential to agree with them the benefits of policy stewardship, how it is reflected in their work programme, and how this is resourced, to enable the appropriate level of investment in future-focused capability beyond the immediate priorities and preferences of the government of the day. The role of steward is to provide advice on the long-term implications of policies, fixing New Zealand’s interpretation of stewardship to the long-term public interest.

In Australia, “stewardship relates not only to financial sustainability and the effective and efficient management of resources, but also to less tangible factors such as maintaining the trust placed in the APS and building a culture of innovation and integrity in policy advice”.<sup>119</sup>

Public service requires not simply reacting to immediate demands for problems and interests, but to have the capacity to shape policy debates and design policies and programmes to improve the long-term well-being of the nation. Strategic foresight in the public service can help to build capability and understanding of futures.<sup>120</sup>

The New Zealand emphasis on stewardship derives in part from the *Māori* concept of *kaitiakitanga*. This gives stewardship in New Zealand an indigenous sense of long-term guardianship and responsible management, drawn from the past and a custodian for the future, and that (in the case of independent stewardship obligations) it is seen as an ethical obligation rather than an ownership right.<sup>121</sup>

Public service motivation arises from “an individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organisations”.<sup>122</sup> Stewardship relates not only to financial sustainability and the effective and efficient management of resources, but also to less tangible factors such as maintaining trust and building a culture of innovation and integrity. The challenge for PAR built around stewardship will be how can ministries and agencies facilitate, guide, support, and enhance, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach and yet laying out clear performance standards.

Described as “a new way of working that allows governments and their agents to effectively influence and nurture steward systems from which outcomes emerge,” system stewardship is seen as critical. It may enable contemporary public service working in less transactional, more relational ways, where governments cannot pretend to control complex outcomes, to constantly adapt.

<sup>119</sup> Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for the Reform of Australian Government Administration. (2010). p. 5.

<sup>120</sup> Ayto, Jonathan. (2014). “Why Departments Need to Be Regulatory Stewards”. *Policy Quarterly* 10, no. 4: 23–27.

<sup>121</sup> Nicholson, A., C. Spiller, and E. Pio. (2019). Ambicultural Governance: Harmonising Indigenous and Western Approaches. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 28(1): 31–47.

<sup>122</sup> Perry, James L., and L. R. Wise. (1990). The Motivational Bases of Public Service. *Public Administration Review*, 50: 367.

## Conclusion: Towards the public service stewardship

Over recent years many public services have confronted extraordinary pressures. One example of this was the fall-out from the Brexit referendum in the UK. This created political instability, leading in August 2019 to the former head of the Civil Service from 2012 to 2014, Lord Kerslake, proposing that the Civil Service should bypass the government in order to avoid a ‘no deal’ Brexit: ‘We are reaching the point where the civil service must consider putting its stewardship of the country ahead of service to the government of the day’.

A system-wide stewardship may be fundamental, yet questions still to be answered include: How will the stewardship focus make a difference? Will this improve the ability to resolve the political problems of the day in a way that maintains inter-generational momentum towards the well-being of citizens? And measurable: how will we know if this has happened? How can stewardship grapple with the toughest issues facing public service, the capability to provide quality strategic advice on long-term, future opportunities, challenges, and resources, when the public service everywhere faces a constant barrage of short run demands?

Does giving the public service the responsibility to act as steward for the national long-term public interest presage political blame-shifting? Can autonomy protect neutrality in an era dominated by ‘wicked problems’ when the political/administrative interface has appeared to be growing fragile almost everywhere?<sup>123</sup> Does the attention focused on the chief executives of departments and agencies risk ‘groupthink’ by cocooning the leadership, and undermining the incentives to tackle short-termism and the “tragedy of the commons”?

What will be the performance indicators for promoting stewardship in: (i) its long-term capability

**“The civil service must consider putting its stewardship of the country ahead of service to the government of the day”.**

and its people; (ii) its institutional knowledge and information; (iii) its systems and processes; (iv) its assets; and (v) the legislation administered by government departments and agencies?

How can other countries develop stewardship as a key aspect for the next era for government? This will prove especially challenging in the absence of the public

service Commissioner’s independent authority to provide direction and oversight of the State services so as to ensure the purpose of New Zealand’s 2020 Act.

How politically realistic are the different dimensions of stewardship, in deeply divided adversarial power systems? In New Zealand, the public service supports ministers to be good stewards, but public service must act as stewards in their own right: how far is this possible in other countries, with less common ground on which to build political consensus? The 2020 Act requires the public service to “pro-actively promote stewardship”. How credible is that aim in fragile states and in the aftermath of civil wars, where public service jobs may be regarded as a significant incentive to pursue through violence?

How can stewardship ensure that the political / civil service interface remains responsive to the public service becoming a learning organisation? How can professional skills development genuinely be nurtured, when a significant disconnect exists because civil service promotion which is often secured by moving around rapidly within and between government departments?

New Zealand has declared “stewardship” to be one of the core principles of the public service, but how to measure “long term impact”? How will the stewards build capability and incentives to maintain long-term focus when the short-term is so pressing? How can officials be responsive to the government of the day, but also maintain sufficient independence to serve the long-term interests? How to allocate sufficient resources beyond the immediate policy priorities

<sup>123</sup> E.g., <https://www.commonwealthgovernance.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Reinventing-trust.pdf>

and preferences of the government of the day? How will top officials be held responsible to their ministers for supporting them to act as good stewards of the public interest, including by: maintaining public institutions, assets, and liabilities; maintaining the currency of any legislation administered by their agency; and providing advice on the long-term implications of policies?

The 2020 Act in New Zealand mandated public service to support “the Government to pursue the long-term public interest” (Section 11), as well as pursuing it independently. What constitutes the “long-term public interest?”

Countries have multiple long-term interests which are often in tension, trade-offs need to be agreed through the political process. Stewardship may empower public servants through statutory obligations to take care of the long-term; or will this public service emphasis on stewardship result in politicisation of intergenerational equity and the public sector's accountability?

Stewardship requires action. Stewards must be proactive, with responsibility for delivering the desired change to address the future needs of state institutions. This is where the tradition of the management of tangible and intangible assets entrusted in the care of the collective is taking the long view. Effective stewardship exercising strategic foresight, demonstrating wisdom and judgment, is allowing public officials to look beyond the immediate, be alert to emerging risks, identify how best to safeguard the interests of future generations through taking proper care of tomorrow today.<sup>124</sup>

In 1997 the UNESCO General Conference unanimously adopted the Declaration of a Bill of Rights for Future Generations. Article 1 of the Bill declared that

*“Future generations have a right to an uncontaminated and undamaged Earth and to its enjoyment as the ground of human history, of culture, and of the social bonds that make each generation and individual a member of one human family”.*

The public service is empowered to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to address their own requirements.

If stewardship is to be now a principle of the public service, has leadership been over-emphasised? As *Tawhiao Potatau te Wherowhero*, the Māori King (1860–1894), said: “*Ki te kahore he whakakitenga ka ngaro te iwi*” (without foresight or vision, the people will be lost). This progressive ambition for public service stewardship can evolve further. The civil service as an efficient manager of public resources can take on more responsibility for nurturing through foresight and vision, the intangible assets of public institutions, the intrinsic motivation of officials for the long-term national interest, job enrichment, and impartiality.

Public service stewardship emerges in various ways: as defined by ministers of the incumbent government; as independently developed for future governments; or as ministers fostering public service built on employee intrinsic motivation, or NPS in reaction to NPM.

The inter-generational long-term social contracts “between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born”, can motivate citizens, civil servants, and politicians across the world, but little empirical evidence exists to guide stewardship. This paper has shown that public sector stewardship can reflect the word's various meanings. It has been most characterised by due care of public resources. Another multifaceted aspect derives from the religious connotation, which emphasises ethical attitude to work, the dimensions of public service motivation, and the limitations of NPM. System-stewardship has since the 1990s advocated networked public officials to create policy communities to tackle complex ‘wicked’ problems. A specific form of stewardship

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<sup>124</sup> Scott, R., and M. Macaulay. (2020). Making sense of New Zealand's ‘spirit of service’: social identity and the civil service. *Public Money & Management* 40, no. 8: 579-588.

reflects how some countries have for the last thirty years been acknowledging traditions around sustainability from indigenous “first nations”. Finally, stewardship for and by the public service is expressed through its independent role: to protect the long-term capability of the state, including by engaging with strategic futures thinking, and to defend immediately the institutions of government from efforts to subvert them. The potential for this controversial dimension to stewardship of the state to be effective, not self-serving, would depend on the degree of trust with ministers and the public.

Under modern *stigwards*, potential implications for public service reform initiatives require more research, as experience develops. Tentative answers to judge the impact on the ACSH participating countries’ public services and their citizenry, for example, as to how far stewardship cannot just serve the government of the day, but also prepare to meet long-term needs, are needed.

Strong international co-operation between public services is desirable now more than ever to ensure that countries have the means to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, build back better and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Each country should consider how fostering stewardship in public service can build national trust and legitimacy, by aligning with its ‘political settlement’. Effective governments bring a sense of stewardship, of public trust and a clear commitment to the public good. Too often, governments have treated their citizens like children in a paternalistic ‘ward of court’ relationship, rather than the beneficiaries of stewardship responsible for the care for and long-term quality and sustainability of outcomes.

Each generation is both a trustee for the planet with obligations to care for it, and a steward with beneficiary rights to exploit it. International organisations like UNDP can support societies to affirm commitment to the welfare of future generations, through stewardship of intergenerational equity and well-being, and the SDGs. The task now is to enable public service stewards to deliver “service over self-interest.”

*“Stewardship implies a responsibility for protecting national well-being, and to serve in the public interest and for the public good.”*

WHO, 2000 Report, p. 34.





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