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Following the mob? How diversity as dogma can damage public services

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IMPACT

The OECD working paper on 'Leadership for a high performing civil service: Towards senior civil service systems in OECD countries' states that diversity among public service leaders is a business imperative that leads to 'improved governance outcomes'. At best, the empirical evidence for this claim is mixed; at worse—it contradicts the OECD's claim. This article demonstrates how fraudulent orthodoxy can weaken public service leadership, impair governance systems and undermine accountability structures. If the role of public service leaders is, as the OECD states 'to keep citizens healthy, safe and economically productive', evidence rather than 'following the mob' should be paramount when seeking to recruit and retain a public service that is fit for purpose. This article offers insights for those with an interest in practical arrangements for leadership, governance and accountability that promote positive outcomes for citizens.

ABSTRACT

The OECD claims that diversity among public service leaders is a business imperative that leads to 'improved governance outcomes'. At best, the empirical evidence for this assertion is mixed. At worst, it renders the OECD claim to be simply untrue. This article demonstrates how diversity as dogma, *idée fixe* and intellectual sophistry can damage public services. Job-related (rather than demographic) diversity can improve business performance but needs to be aligned with appropriate leadership structures, governance systems and accountability arrangements.

Those who try to lead the people can only do so by following the mob (Oscar Wilde, see Murray, 2008).

The show goes on, but now it is played as farce (Auberon Waugh, 1973).

There are no solutions. There are only trade-offs (Thomas Sowell, 2007).

Introduction

The business case for workplace diversity is seemingly axiomatic. 'Managing diversity' (Anderson & Metcalf, 2003, p. vii) to create effects such as recruitment from a larger pool of talent, an improved ability to innovate and access to a wider customer base should enhance business performance (for example Cox & Blake, 1991; Jackson et al., 2003; Barak, 2015; Fine et al., 2020). As well as being morally abhorrent, prejudicial practices can damage business performance (for example Chatman et al., 1998; Krell, 2008; Herring, 2009).

Accordingly, the OECD working paper *Leadership for a high performing civil service: Towards senior civil service systems in OECD countries* claims that diversity among public service leaders is 'a business imperative' that can 'improve governance outcomes for all citizens' (Gerson, 2022, p. 48). If the ultimate role of public service leaders is, as the OECD states 'to keep citizens healthy, safe and economically productive' (Gerson, 2022, p. 12), then the recruitment and retention of a public service that is fit for purpose, including the pursuit of greater diversity among public

service leaders, should be aligned with this role. Adverse effects on business performance and, ultimately, poorer outcomes for citizens might otherwise arise.

This article investigates the claim that diversity among public service leaders is a business imperative that leads to improved governance outcomes. At best, the empirical evidence for this claim is mixed; at worse—it contradicts the claim. 'Following the mob' by way of moral or even political conviction can weaken public services and, in some cases, impair leadership, governance systems and accountability arrangements to the extent that adverse outcomes for citizens manifest. The recruitment and retention of public service leaders should be based on evidence: motives (however well intentioned) should not mislead. Anything that undermines the aim to keep citizens healthy, safe and economically productive risks 'the show being played as farce' or, perhaps, demands explicit recognition that there is a 'trade-off' between diversity and (via sub-optimal business performance) outcomes for citizens.

While conceptualizations of workplace diversity (for example Williams & O'Reilly, 1998; Van Dijk et al., 2012; Farndale et al., 2015) vary, there is a degree of consensus that differences between individuals and groups at work evoke a perception that 'others' are different from the self. While the practical dimensions of workplace diversity are, therefore, almost infinite, two broad conceptualizations have been identified (for example Williams & O'Reilly, 1998; Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007): demographic diversity and job-related diversity. Dimensions of the former include

readily observable characteristics such as sex, age and ethnicity. The latter encompasses 'hidden' and often 'deeper' dimensions such as functional experience, tenure and educational background. The empirical evidence presents mixed conclusions, but there are indications (for example Pelled et al., 1999; De Dreu & West, 2001) that job-related (rather than demographic) diversity can improve business performance when aligned with effective leadership structures, governance systems and accountability arrangements.

A review of the empirical evidence on the business case for diversity is followed by two short case studies that illustrate how the *idée fixe* of demographic diversity can weaken public service leadership, impair governance systems and undermine accountability structures. An important impact is made by using a practitioner perspective: the author's experience in a variety of governance roles and interviews with practitioners inform the case studies. An international range of evidence is used, with purposive sampling of two case studies drawn from practitioner experience in a local authority in the UK and a supranational organization that has its headquarters in Canada. Organizations in these countries share leadership, governance and accountability arrangements and are subject to broadly similar diversity requirements.

A conceptual frame is applied using the notion of 'luxury beliefs' (Henderson, 2019). Luxury beliefs are espoused by those who seek social status by way of signalling moral virtue. Such views are often contradicted by empirical evidence and confer costs on the working class. Contributions are made to the public management literature on leadership (for example 't Hart, 2011; Hartley & Allison, 2000; Hartley & Manzie, 2020), the reform of public governance (for example Massey, 2019) and equality (for example Newman, 2002; Osborne, 2008). While not focusing on the business case for workplace diversity, Thomas and Cooper's (2020) investigation of the appointment of UK public inquiries is of relevance to the argument developed in this article. The construction of issue salience can lead to inquiry types that lack the structural constituents and scope to address complex matters; demographic diversity is similarly deficient in the context of business performance.

Background

Leadership and diversity among public service leaders

A 'sharp sense of ethics and integrity' (Hartley & Manzie, 2020, p. 569), alongside technical skills and political astuteness, is a key capability of leaders in public services. 't Hart (2011) argues that effective public service leaders are those who can maintain a viable balance between these capabilities and offers a framework for public service leaders in which such political 'nous' is construed as: 'A set of skills about the interest, goals and values of stakeholders and how to exercise leadership in ways which take account of diverse and competing interests among stakeholders' (Hartley & Manzie, 2020, p. 571).

This description includes the word 'diverse'. Taking account of competing interests might encompass the empathy that is needed to fulfil leadership roles in ways that reflect the public interest; it might also encompass the

increasing prevalence of diversity-related issues. The extent to which it follows that diversity is therefore a 'business imperative' is less clear. Thomas and Cooper (2020) consider doubts regarding the business case for diversity to be 'unfortunate' and question 'the empirical experience of egalitarianism as separate from the top line of policy-making and rhetoric' (Thomas & Cooper, 2020, p. 421). This claim is paradoxical. The pursuit of diversity in the absence of empirical evidence would be a consequence of the very rhetoric of which Thomas and Cooper (2020) appear so critical.

Drawing on narrative analyses of the politics of democratic diversity in governance processes, partnerships and representation in the UK's 'New Labour' modernization programme, Newman (2002) argues that public services might form alliances with those that drive progressive change. That the tenets of this 'progressive politics' (Newman, 2002, p. 12) might lack a robust empirical base or lead to adverse outcomes for citizens is not considered.

Massey (2019, p. 16) highlights how policy capacity and good governance rest on public service leaders who are competent, honest and 'skilled in the art of statehood'. The short-termism of New Public Management (NPM) is questioned, not least in terms of its ability to restore trust in public service leaders and the governance of public bodies. Liberal authoritarianism as a basis for public management reforms is rejected in favour of a state regulation that balances economic growth with the public good.

Workplace diversity in the public sector: UK

Workplace demographic diversity in the UK (different regulations largely apply in Northern Ireland) is underpinned by anti-discrimination legislation that has its origin in statute law and regulation from the 1970s (although it can be traced to earlier legislation such as the Sex Disqualification Removal Act 1919). Most recently, the Equality Act 2010 consolidated much of the prior legislation and introduced protected demographic characteristics such as age, disability, maternity, race and religion. The Act protects employees against victimization and harassment based on these characteristics. Specific attempts to promote diversity among public service leaders in central government include the *Civil service diversity and inclusions strategy 2022–2025* (UK government, n.d.) which provides a framing for the promotion of diversity in the civil service. The Local Government Association's *Equality framework for local government* (LGA, 2021) and *Diverse by design* (LGA, n.d.) guidance provides similar framing for municipal government.

The UK civil service 'as a whole is broadly representative of the UK's working age population' (Cabinet Office, 2021). The latest data on demographic diversity (Cabinet Office, 2021) reveals that 54.2% of civil servants are women (compared to 48.1% in the national workforce); 14.3% of civil servants are from ethnic minorities (13.6% nationally); and 13.6% are disabled (14.7% nationally). Some parts of the civil service, notably people in senior leadership roles, are relatively less diverse than the whole. In the Senior Civil Service (SCS), 47.3% of employees are women; 8.2% are from ethnic minorities; and 6.1% are disabled. Equivalent data on job-related diversity has not been published.

The local government workforce in England and Wales (SOLACE, 2023) is less demographically diverse than the UK civil service. When measured by ethnicity and analysed by region (somewhat counter-intuitively given differing levels of demographic diversity between the local authorities that comprise those regions), it is also less demographically diverse than the populations that it serves. The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE) (2023, p. 21) find that some regions 'experience a 100% rate of underrepresentation across all [constituent] councils analysed' although 'note that exercising caution in the analysis of representation' is necessary due to methodological flaws in how the data have been collected and analysed.

Workplace diversity in the public sector: Canada

Similarity of legislative context for workplace diversity in the UK and Canada is self-evident: the legislative and regulatory context for government in the latter is rooted in principles and concepts that, in many senses, originate in the former. Workplace diversity legislation in Canada can be traced to the Canadian Human Rights Act 1977 (although anti-discrimination laws enacted by some provinces pre-date this legislation, for example Ontario's Racial Discrimination Act 1944 and the Bill of Rights 1947 in Saskatchewan), which prohibits discrimination on grounds such as race, ethnicity and sexual orientation by federally regulated employers. In contemporary Canada, the Employment Equity Act 1986 (revised in 1995) requires federal organizations to use 'equity' programmes to address under-representation. Employees of public sector organizations at the provincial level are protected by similar legislation—for example the Pay Equity Act 1990 in Ontario and the Public Service Act 1996 in British Columbia. Promotion of diversity among public service leaders in Canada includes mentoring schemes and programmes to increase representation through promotion in federal government and, for example, the *Manitoba government diversity and inclusion strategy* at the provincial level.

Demographic diversity in the federal government in Canada is measured using four main employment designated groups: women, indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities and individuals with disabilities. The data reveal similar levels of representation to those in the UK civil service. At the end of March 2022, 56.0% of federal government employees were women (compared to 53.3% in the national workforce); 5.2% were indigenous peoples (3.8% nationally); 6.2% were disabled (9.1% nationally); 20.2% (17.2% nationally) were from ethnic minorities. As in the UK, demographic diversity in senior leadership roles was generally lower than that of the whole workforce: 48.2% of executive employees (being broadly equivalent to the UK SCS) were women; 5.2% were indigenous peoples; 5.3% were disabled; and 11.2% were from ethnic minorities (Government of Canada, 2023). As in the UK, equivalent data on job-related diversity are not available.

Methodology

A review of the empirical evidence for the business case for diversity is followed by two short qualitative field studies . The former is used to examine the claim that diversity is a business imperative; the latter offer practical insights into how public services can be damaged by the pursuit of diversity as dogma and *idée fixe*. The case studies present a practitioner perspective of how public service leadership, governance systems and accountability structures can be undermined by well-intentioned attempts to achieve greater demographic diversity in the workplace to the extent that adverse outcomes for citizens manifest.

Methodological choices reflected the need to consider the topic in ways that provided for the investigation of the practical impact of diversity on public services. The limitations of both literature review and case study approaches are acknowledged, as are the implications of the different methods of data collection (participant observation and semi-structured interviews, respectively) that are deployed in the case studies.

Case selection

Empirical detail was collected from two qualitative case studies (Ahrens & Chapman, 2006): a large local authority in the UK and the secretariat of a supranational organization. Both entities had implemented policies and processes that sought to increase the demographic diversity of their senior leaders. Examples include the creation of a 'diversity advisory group' comprising employees and external members, the role of which included 'supporting, challenging and monitoring' selection decisions for senior leaders, the use of predictive modelling to improve accountability for the delivery of diversity-related targets and the linking of an elements of performance-related pay to demographic diversity metrics. Purposive sampling was applied: the author served in a non-executive governance role at the UK entity and had professional contacts at the supranational organization.

Data collection

Data were collected over a seven-year period. Different methods of data collection were utilized at each of the case organizations. Longitudinal participant observation (for example Yu, 2020), an approach that offers flexibility and breadth of understanding of phenomena, was deployed at the local authority. Face-to-face interaction with practitioners and observation of individuals in organizational settings generated a context-rich picture using participant observation of formal meetings, informal discussions and other organizational activities. Approximately 120 hours of formal meetings, informal discussions and other organizational activities were observed between 2014 and 2022. Field notes were taken during or shortly after each event.

Semi-structured interviews (please see Table 1) were the principal source of evidence collected from the supranational organization. Twelve interviews with practitioners were conducted between June 2021 and October 2023. Each practitioner was interviewed twice. Follow-up interviews provided opportunities to explore points of interest and to clarify initial interpretations. Respondents were encouraged to share their 'lived experience' and to provide accounts in their own words. Open-ended questioning and a focus on concrete experiences were utilized. Interviews were conducted

Table 1. Interviews.

Code	Interviewee	Date of interview one	Date of interview two	Generic role	Years of service in federal government
Civil servants					
C1	Civil servant C1	August 2021	October 2023	Financial officer	14
C2	Civil servant C2	September 2021	October 2023	Workforce development	21
C3	Civil servant C3	September 2021	October 2023	Economic policy	11
Politicians and political aides					
P1	Politician P1	June 2021	October 2023	Supervisory committee member	10
P2	Politician P2	June 2021	October 2023	Supervisory committee member	6
P3	Politician P3	July 2021	October 2023	Policy advisor ('staffer')	2

Notes: P1 and P2 were interviewed together.

online and were between 35 and 60 minutes in duration. Audio-recording, with the permission of interviewees, and transcription were used. While not offering as rich an insight as participant observation, such interviews offered access to phenomena as they are experienced by organizational actors and provide flexibility that is useful in under-researched areas (for example Barker et al., 2012). In the present study, they also provided access that would not otherwise have been possible because the author lived and worked in the UK throughout this period.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using an overarching qualitative and thematic approach (for example Miles et al., 2014). A multi-stage analysis was applied with a view to 'selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the data' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). A 'sense of the whole' was developed using case study reports, and initial categories and key themes were identified within and across the data; frames of observation (Abhayawansa et al., 2018) were then established. Subsequent phases of 'back-and-forth' analysis were then applied with a view to identifying themes that related to the aim of the study and its conceptual framing. These themes included the influence of demographic diversity on aspects of leadership, governance systems and accountability arrangements.

Findings

Literature review

Evidence from consultancy firms such as McKinsey's *Diversity matters* (Hunt et al., 2015) and Ernst & Young's (EY) *Time for diversity: Accelerating performance in corporate boardrooms* is often used to support the business case for demographic diversity in the workplace. The former examines data from 366 public companies. Organizations in the top quartile of this sample for aspects of demographic diversity among senior management were found to be up to 35% more likely to generate financial returns above their national industry medians than those in the bottom quartile. The latter offers evidence that indicates that greater gender diversity among senior leaders generates better financial outcomes.

Ostensibly, these findings present compelling support for demographic diversity. Notwithstanding criticism of their respective methodologies (for example ; Dwertmann et al., 2016; Eagly, 2016) (criticism that, at least in the case of Hunt et al., 2015, is acknowledged by the respective authors) the McKinsey and EY reports are popular, particular among practitioners. Such popularity is unsurprising: reports produced by management consultancies are, by their nature,

typically more accessible to practitioners than academic research; large professional services firms such as McKinsey and EY have, understandably, a vested interest in producing and promoting work that generates revenue; executives and managers in the private sector must deliver returns in highly competitive business environments. In public services, senior leaders face complex challenges that must often be addressed under conditions of austerity, partnership working and volatile political contexts. In these highly pressurized environments, management consultancies, advocacy groups and so-called 'activists' can make compelling cases for business practices.

A body of academic research (for example Desvaux et al., 2010; Dawson et al., 2014; Kurth, 2015) offers some support for the view of workplace diversity that is typically presented by management consultancies and advocacy groups. A review of the literature by Scott (2011) reports positive correlations between firm profitability and board-level ethnic diversity in the USA. Similar findings are reported in the UK (for example Singh, 2007) and mainland Europe (for example Subeliani & Tsogas, 2005). Gender diversity among senior leaders has been found to yield both greater effectiveness (for example Higgs, 2003) and, in the longer term, improved financial performance (Ahern & Dittmar, 2011). Brooke's (2003) analysis of archival survey data found that employment of older workers led to a net increase in costs. Joshi (2006) suggests that improvements in sales performance can be supported when the disability, religious and sexual orientation profiles of its workforce are aligned with those of its customers.

Leaving aside their egregious moral implications and consequences, prejudicial practices and exclusion have been observed to damage business performance, not least in terms of higher costs, poor corporate image and reducing the potential pool of talented employees (for example Chatman et al., 1998; Krell, 2008; Herring, 2009). In instrumental terms, efforts to reduce costs, improve reputation and recruit and retain talented employees creates a business case for workplace diversity. Wright et al.'s (2014) mixed-methods study of diversity in scientific, technical, engineering, mathematical and medical (STEMM) fields offers some support for diversity in this context, but finds it to be 'complicated, subtle and highly contextual'. Interviews with senior leaders reveal some evidence that increased demographic diversity leads to improved organizational outcomes (Ozbilgin et al., 2014) as does an experimental study by McLeod and Lobel (1992) that indicates that ethnically heterogenous groups produce better quality ideas than ethnically homogenous groups.

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses of the literature go some way to enhancing this business case. Urwin et al.'s (2013, p. vi) review of academic and practitioner sources

reports evidence that 'firms have reaped business benefits from equality and diversity, but not all firms in all contexts at all times'. A meta-analysis of 108 empirical studies revealed that diversity contributed to increased creativity and satisfaction (Stahl et al., 2009) albeit alongside increased costs due to conflict and decreased social integration.

The academic literature also includes a substantial body of evidence that undermines the view that workplace diversity is a business imperative. Two related factors are at the heart of this criticism: a lack of causality and a failure to control for endogeneity.

While some studies report small positive relationships between diversity and business performance, strong evidence of causal relationships is absent from the literature. Eagly's (2016) review of eight meta-analyses and five systematic literature reviews of the effect of gender integration on corporate boards and diversity-performance relation in workgroups reveals mixed evidence that is far from supportive of the 'business imperative' promulgated by the OECD. A meta-analysis of data from 8,757 teams in 39 studies is used by Joshi and Roh (2009) to examine the impact of demographic diversity on performance. Marginal positive and negative effects are reported, with the former associated with job-related and the latter with demographic variables. Joshi and Roh (2009) argue that these weak relationships obscure such factors such industry sector and occupation that might lead to demographic diversity having a greater impact (both beneficial and detrimental) on business performance. Overall, analysis of the evidence leads to a conclusion that 'the direct effect of diversity on performance is essentially zero' (Joshi & Roh, 2009, p. 618). Some of the evidence in support of the business case for diversity is qualitative (Urwin et al., 2013; Wright et al., 2014); Bishu and Kennedy (2020) call for a broadening of this qualitative approach to the study of diversity. While this article does not seek to decry the valuable insights generated by qualitative research, its lack of causality means that the business case for diversity using just this evidence is far from robust.

Of the quantitative studies, most do not control for differences between firms or other factors that might influence business performance. The problem of endogeneity in this context, being circumstances in which business performance is influenced by something other than workplace diversity, renders any claim for diversity as a business imperative to be problematic. Eagly (2016, p. 2016) is particularly critical of the evidence and data presentations used by management consultancies and advocacy groups in this respect, most of which 'would certainly not be publishable in academic journals'. Assertions regarding the relationship between demographic diversity and competitive advantage are seen as tentative at best and to fail to recognize possibilities such as reverse causation (Eagly, 2016). Further criticism of this lack of endogeneity and causality is provided by Wright et al. (2014). Notwithstanding some contextually contingent support for diversity in STEMM occupations, any business rationale for diversity is found to be anecdotal and based on 'conviction'. The impact of diversity on business performance is reported to be difficult to measure, with leadership behaviours and task-related dynamics found to be more qualitatively important.

Some studies that do control for endogeneity (for example Adams & Ferreira, 2009) report a negative relation between demographic diversity and financial performance; other statistically robust studies (for example Pletzer et al., 2015 Post & Byron, 2015) report small positive relations. By considering the business case for diversity among senior leaders in the context of what can be an ideologically polarized and politically charged issue, the importance of evidence-based policy design (rather than one that reflects the doctrinally motivated demands of so-called 'activists' and special-interest groups) is emphasized (Eagly, 2016).

Armstrong et al. (2010) suggest that the apparent failure to realize the benefits of demographic diversity in the workplace is a consequence of praxis rather than principle. 'Very real benefits for both employers and employees' (Armstrong et al., 2010, p. 990) are seen as predicated on investment in each of high-performance work systems and diversity management systems. If such investment is made and systems include measures of the extent to which organizations practice diversity management, then there is evidence of improved business performance. However, like much of the literature that supports the business case for diversity, the design of Armstrong et al.'s (2010) study does not support a claim of causality.

The lack of emphasis on job-related diversity in the light of the mixed evidence for a business case for demographic diversity is perplexing. In a review of the literature on these two broad conceptualizations of diversity, Jackson et al. (2003) report that 89% of 63 studies published between 1997 and 2002 focused on demographics. Yadav and Lenka's (2020) review of the literature reports a continued imbalance, with 71% of 123 papers published in leading peer-reviewed management journals from 1991 to 2018 focusing on age, gender and race, with a related emphasis of research being situated in a US context.

Yadav and Lenka (2022) conclude that, notwithstanding innovation spurred by the impact of conditions engendered by the Covid 19 pandemic, the relative lack of attention on job-related diversity needs to be addressed if organizations are to recruit and retain workforces that can confront the challenges of a competitive business environment. This assertion is made more compelling by evidence from meta-analyses conducted by Jayne and Dipboye (2004) and Horwitz and Horwitz (2007), respectively. The former indicates that increased demographic diversity does not necessarily lead to increased task-related knowledge, skills and experience; a meta-analysis of 146 studies highlights stronger positive relationships between job-related (rather than demographic) diversity and objective measures of performance. The latter utilize the results of 35 studies and reveals that unlike job-related diversity, demographic diversity does not have a significant positive effect on team performance in organizations. The simple, 'myopic understanding' (Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007, p. 1010) that all forms of diversity have the same effect on performance is questioned.

Case studies

Following the mob? A large principal local authority in the UK

Alpha council ('Alpha') is a large local authority in England. It is responsible for the provision of a range of local services

including social care, street cleaning, public health and transport. At the end of March 2022, it had a gross revenue expenditure budget of £1 billion, and served a population of over 300,000.

Alpha appointed a new chief executive in 2017 following a recruitment campaign, part of which sought to address a lack of diversity among its senior leaders. Alpha sought to follow recent decisions by neighbouring local authorities to appoint senior leaders from under-represented groups. Alpha's 'diversity advisory group' supported the appointment of the new chief executive, citing SOLACE data of '100% rate of underrepresentation' in its chief executive post (that this rate is for a population of one single person appears to have been overlooked).

In 2017, the chief executive created a consultancy unit in Alpha, the purpose of which was to sell expertise to overseas customers. The unit was not set up as a trading company of Alpha and the financial impact its activities were not consolidated according to accounting standards; both actions are unlawful. As well as a 'market-leading' salary, the chief executive was awarded an 'international allowance' of approximately 20% of this salary arising from their work for this consultancy alongside substantial expenditure on business class travel and accommodation. Risks arising from the operation of the unit were absent from Alpha's corporate risk register; management accounts and records of time spent by council employees on work for the consultancy were not maintained.

The chief executive was suspended in late 2020. Nearly £200,000 was found to have been paid to the chief executive without proper authorization, leading to the need to issue a Section 114 notice under the Local Government Finance Act 1988, which requires chief finance officers to report:

> If … any person … has made … a decision which involves or would involve the authority incurring expenditure which is unlawful … or has taken a course of action which … would be unlawful and likely to cause a loss or deficiency

A public dispute followed and was framed by the (suspended) chief executive in the context of a clash with some elected members over corporate support for the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. Several cabinet members resigned to express their support for the chief executive; claims of prejudicial conduct followed; referrals to Alpha's standards committee and grievance complaints by officers increased dramatically. In 2022, the chief executive was paid over £200,000 which included a payment to settle 'injury to feelings' attributed, at least in part, to claims of prejudice. The amounts paid to the chief executive without proper authorization were never recovered.

In 2022, Alpha commissioned SOLACE to undertake an independent review of governance. SOLACE (2022, p. 2) concluded that Alpha had:

> Lost its way over a number of years to the extent that leadership at both political and managerial levels is distracted, and no longer focused on external issues but involved to an unhealthy extent in internal battles

Investigations revealed that the scoring system used to assess performance did not rate the chief executive as the 'best' potential appointee. There were claims that some members of the advisory group were associates of the chief executive and that members of this group, alongside other officers

and some elected members, had engaged in factional infighting, with senior leaders at Alpha 'having forgotten' the accountability, scrutiny, openness and documentation needed to run local government services. SOLACE's report added that, despite a relatively generous funding position, there were indications of 'a lack of oversight and leadership' and that many services had performed at lower levels than might be expected.

The show goes on, but it is played as farce: The secretariat of a supranational organization

Beta is the secretariat of a supranational organization that comprises member states from across the world. The organization promotes peace, representative democracy and individual liberty. Beta is responsible for facilitating co-operation between members, advising on policy and helping members to implement the policies of the organization. Beta's secretary-general is the senior official and public representative of the organization; all of Beta's employees are responsible and accountable to the secretary-general. Appointment to the post is by a vote of the supranational organization's constituent members.

In 2016, it was alleged that the recently appointed secretary-general had bribed members to secure votes for appointment. As P1 put it 'There was a suggestion that [the secretary-general's] behaviour had gone beyond mere campaigning' [politician P1]. Further allegations included links with unregulated charitable organizations (described by politician P2 as 'misjudged as best, fundamentally misplaced at worse') profligate use of the secretariat's budget (referred to as 'chaotic and disastrous' by civil servant C1), lavish refurbishment of the secretary-general's official residence (including £500 for a toilet seat), association with business-people who were 'borderline criminals' (civil servant C3) with convictions for fraud and improper appointment of family members to official posts.

An external audit of procurement arrangements in the same year revealed that tender procedures had been circumvented to allow contracts worth over £250,000 to be given to an insolvent business owned by a friend and former colleague of the secretary-general. 'Gaps' in record-keeping meant that Beta was not able to respond fully to requests for evidence by the auditor. Civil servant C2 argued that attempts to enforce established arrangements for control and risk management were:

> Repeatedly stymied by fear of being seen to be anything other than committed to the diversity agenda. There was a suggestion that differences in culture were a basis for negating financial procedures. (Civil servant C2.)

Some argued that a substantial increase in grievance claims and employment tribunal costs were due to the secretary-general's failure to provide appropriate leadership. Politician P3 argued that: 'the secretary-general prioritized [their] politics, rather than [their] responsibility as a leader. [Their] focus was on identity politics, rather than doing the right thing as a leader'.

Control weaknesses and other reports of 'cronyism and profligacy' led to suspension of funding by several member states pending improvement to financial procedures. Work on projects such as efforts to improve gender equality in parts of Africa, mentoring programmes for aspiring diplomats and the provision of development finance to

small member states were disrupted. As civil servant C1 put it: 'the ceremony of administration went on, but it was a sham'. Expenditure on an IT system to predict and model the delivery of diversity-related targets across Beta continued, having been deemed 'priority' by the secretary-general. The project to develop this IT system, which cost £600,000, was abandoned two years later.

Discussion and conclusions

Following the mob?

This article investigates the claim that diversity among public service leaders is a business imperative that leads to improved governance outcomes. At best, the empirical evidence for this claim is mixed. At worst, the evidence contradicts the claim. 'Following the mob' by way of dogma and *idée fixe* can weaken public services. Ideologically-motivated pursuit of diversity in public services can impair leadership, governance systems and accountability arrangements to the extent that adverse outcomes for citizens manifest. The recruitment and retention of public service leaders who are fit for purpose and, as the OECD states, best able 'to keep citizens healthy, safe and economically productive' (Gerson, 2022, p. 12) should be paramount. 'Following the mob' undermines the fulfilment of this aim and risks 'the show being played as farce' or, perhaps, demands recognition by those responsible for public services that there is a trade-off between diversity, business performance and outcomes for citizens.

In terms of Alpha, this article does not assert that the events at that council should be attributed to the diversity-related characteristics of the chief executive, who was an experienced and well-respected public official. It should also be noted that the consultancy unit generated profits for Alpha. However, 'following the mob' played a part in the appointment decision. In this context, the targeted recruitment campaign, the override of the scoring system and the alleged association with members of the advisory group are problematic. Subsequently, leadership, governance and accountability arrangements were weak; myriad factors, including claims of prejudice, influenced decision-making by and relationships between senior leaders. That dimensions of diversity were used wilfully and maliciously (both in favour of and against the chief executive) while the services provided by a well-funded council deteriorated should be of great concern to those who seek a public service that is fit for purpose.

The show goes on, but now it is played as farce

As at Alpha, this article does not contend that there is a relationship between the secretary-general of Beta's diversity-related characteristics and the alleged impropriety at the secretariat. Indeed, member states voted to reappoint the secretary-general, albeit by a narrow margin. Rather, it has been suggested that diversity-related concerns were at least a factor in failing to address what were, in some cases, egregious control weaknesses. Failures to initiate, implement and conclude investigations into allegations of impropriety have also been associated with a reluctance to be seen to do anything contrary to the promotion of demographic diversity. As such, the 'show' at

Beta went on, but became increasingly farcical as the impact of cuts to crucial projects became manifest.

Methodological decisions focused on the need to consider the topic in ways that generate understanding for those with an interest in practical arrangements for leadership, governance and accountability in public services. Nevertheless, the limitations of a qualitative approach, the implications of the different methods of data collection deployed at each entity and the lack of reliability that arises from a case study design and participant observation's lack of representativeness (Langley & Klag, 2019) are acknowledged.

In relation to a conceptual frame provided by Henderson's (2019) notion of luxury beliefs, costs were imposed on those who relied on services provided by each of Alpha and Beta. If those that seek a public service that is fit for purpose are to avoid claims that the view of diversity as a business imperative is a luxury belief, as both Jayne and Dipboye (2004) and Eagly (2016) argue, there is a need to acknowledge the rhetoric of so-called 'activists' and the implications of the design and findings of research. Both advocates and critics of diversity and its relation to business performance promulgate misunderstood or even false generalizations about empirical findings. Whatever the rationale for such behaviour in relation to the recruitment and retention of public service leaders, proponents of an unfounded business case for diversity risk undermining the confidence of policymakers and, crucially, the support of citizens.

There are no solutions. There are only trade-offs

This article does not assert that all attempts to improve workplace diversity necessarily weaken public service leadership. Rather, it offers insights into how diversity as a fraudulent orthodoxy can lead to adverse outcomes for citizens. If there is no clear evidence that there is a business case for workplace diversity in public services, there remains the potential that such diversity is a moral imperative, not least in terms of 'social justice' considerations; but if the pursuit of diversity as a moral imperative leads to anything other than keeping 'citizens healthy, safe and economically productive' (Gerson, 2022, p. 12) then even this moral case becomes questionable. At the very least, there is a need for a clear articulation of how and why arrangements for leadership, governance and accountability in public services should lead to anything other than the best possible outcomes for citizens. As such, there might be a need to acknowledge that public services should recognize the need for 'trade-offs' rather than 'solutions'.

This is not to argue that moral or even political conviction should not inform efforts to create a public service that is fit for purpose. Prejudicial practices are unacceptable, irrespective of political stance or views of what might constitute 'social justice': they have no place in public service leadership, governance or accountability processes. Indeed, the empirical evidence suggests that such processes can damage business performance and produce poorer outcomes for citizens. However, motives should not mislead. Luxury beliefs are no basis for a public service that is fit for purpose: the costs borne, often by those least able to afford them, are unacceptable. Even good intentions

become problematic when they refuse to be informed, tempered and corrected by evidence and reason. When evidence is subject to wilful distortion, fraudulent orthodoxies emerge and, in terms of a public service that is fit for purpose, the users of public services suffer.

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