

# What does the Minister do?

*Paper for Dansk selskab for statskundskab, Vejle Fjord, October 2016.*

*Draft paper: Please do not quote.*

*Version: 29.09.16*

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## **Abstract**

If management matters to performance, then it is also likely to be of importance how managers spend their time. Hence, ‘what does the manager do’ has been a classical research question, which this paper applies to leaders at the ultimate top asking, what does the minister do? The research is based on a unique data-set consisting of a survey with 18 out of 20 ministers, and qualitative interviews with Ministers as well as former Ministers. The Ministers performed a detailed registration of their time-consumption during a working week. In addition data on job-tasks and geographical locations were provided. The unique data collection allows us to insight into how ministers spend their time and in the working conditions at the top of the central democratic institutions. The data is analyzed drawing on the insights of the work-activity school, and the paper shows, that when looking into how Ministers spend their time, the metaphor developed by Carlson (1991[1951]) of the CEO as a puppet master being pulled by an endless amount of strings – rather than the other way around – also fits the Ministers.

## 1. Introduction

The research question ‘What do Ministers do?’ is simple and straightforward. However, it is drawing on a classical question in the work activity school of management research (Sune Carlsson, Leonard Sayles, Henry Mintzberg, Rosemary Stewart, John Kotter and others) which has drawn if not a trail of blood, then at least a long and contested research tradition through academic history. Nevertheless, we argue that this approach – while acknowledging its limitations – may still be useful when applied to the top political managers in order to cast new light on some of the challenges to our democracy. If we assume that management matters, then it is likely to make a difference to performance how managers spend their time (Hales, 1986). The classical question ‘what do managers do?’ is interesting, when applied to managers in general, but even more so when applied to democratic leaders. Not just because what they do may make a difference to society in general, but also because it can contribute with transparency into how our democracy works. Insight in the daily working lives of the political managers may not just reduce the gap between the political elite and the people, but also provide an important insight in the working conditions of our democracy.

Even if ‘what does the manager do’ is a classical question in the work activity school, it has not made much progress in terms of theoretical development. The level of theory in the field remain largely descriptive, something often regretted by the leading scholars in the field (Mintzberg, 1991; Carlsson, ([1951]/1991). However, this does not change the fact that it is still an interesting question and even more so when applied to top-politicians. Here a description of how democracy works has a value in its own right, and this description can draw on the method and insights from the work activity school. However, in order to make these descriptive categories applicable to this particular group the field needs to be developed. Thus the conceptual contribution of the paper is to do so drawing on the concept and approach from the work-activity school.

The paper focusses on a particular group of political top managers; namely ministers. 18 out of 20 ministers in the Danish government at the time participated in a survey containing time registration in categories for a full week. This type of survey is unique as it is very difficult to get access to this type of data at an elite level. Thus, the empirical contribution of the study is to provide a description of what the Ministers do based on an unusual and high quality data-set.

Given the importance of top-politicians in democracy, it is surprising how little academic attention has been given to their working conditions. There are to our knowledge no studies of ministers and only a few of MPs. The information we have about politicians in general is mainly

about the overall workload whereas less is known about the distribution of time on different tasks (e.g. Fenno 1978). These studies show that the work load is high, that is more than 55 hours per week in the UK (Weinberg et al. 1999), 70 hours in the House of Representatives (Congressional Management Foundation and the Society for Human Resource Management 2013), 66 hours among the Swedish MPs (Hansson 2008) and equally high in the Australian parliament (Brenton 2010). The political elite seems even to work more than the business elite (Vianello and Moore 2004; Hansson 2008). Danish studies also indicate tough working conditions at the local and national level (Damgaard 1979; Jensen 2003; Berg and Kjær 2005; Dahlgaard et al. 2009; Pedersen et al. 2013). In sum, based on these studies, there seems to be no doubt that the political elite work long hours and experience a high work pressure, but no studies are found of the working conditions of the politicians at the ultimate top, e.g. the ministers, and few studies have focused on the content of the work.

## **2. Theoretical approach**

### *The approach in the work activity school*

'What does the manager do?' is a classical question in management theory. The work activity school has traditionally been trying to answer the question by developing categories of work tasks and activities and studying the distribution of time spent on the different categories. An early example is Fayol ([1916]/ 1949), who based on his own experience formulated five functions of management; namely planning, organizing, coordinating, commanding and controlling. Drawing on a similar line of conceptualization, Gullick (1937b: 13) answered the question with 'POSDCORB', that is planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting and budgeting. This acronym has been favored ever since, though several others exist (see Urwick, 1943; White, 1948). In contrast, Mintzberg (1973) proposed a framework where the categories were based on a role perspective consisting of ten roles grouped into three categories; namely interpersonal roles, informational roles and decisional roles. However, the categorization of managerial work has been subject to some generic criticisms.

One criticism addresses the quality of the categorization. That is whether the categories are comprehensive, mutually exclusive, and parsimonious. That is on the quality of the conceptualization. For instance, Mintzberg (1991) offers a compelling critique of the state-of the art - including his own contribution - for being under-theorized and not parsimonious. He argues that no comprehensive theory exists, but rather a great many lists, the vast majority being repetitions of

earlier ones 'or sloppy combinations in which to the proverbial apples and oranges have been added elephants and laughter' (Mintzberg, *ibid*: 102). This line of critique does not question the approach as such, but suggests that encompassing and parsimonious lists need to be developed.

A second criticism addresses the content of the categories. Here the issue at stake is what should be categorized? For instance that POSDCORB does not suggest, that the managers spend as much time working with people outside the organization, as with people inside the organization (Mintzberg, *ibid*). Carlsson ([1951]/1991: 25) also argues that the PODSCORB categories give us some ideas about the responsibilities of the managing director, but says very little about what he is actually doing. In contrast, they remain functional categories which provide insight in the responsibilities of the chief executives. They rarely fulfil the qualification of operational concepts; namely that they should be synonymous with a clearly defined set of operations. One example is the concept 'cooperation'. This concept does not describe a particular set of operations but refer to all operations which lead to a certain result, namely to coordinate (Carlsson [1951]/1991: 26). Down the same line Hales (1986:105) argue that the categories distinguish, what managers do (actual behaviors) from what they seek to achieve (desired outcomes). Thus, there is a distinction between the organizational function and the managerial activity. In other words, the focus is on management in general not the behavior of individual managers (Hales, *ibid.*). In line with this, Sayles (1979: 8) calls for a need to find the 'how' between the "why" and the "what". Work activity categories may be static lists of categories according to the job task, the function, and the position, but they can also be dynamic conceptualizing the fit between the individual and the job (Stewart, 1991: 141).

A third criticism is that the categories are a rationalization – an attempt to cling to an illusion of rationality and positivism in a world which is socially constructed and context dependent. Mintzberg suggests that one of the reasons for the lack of progress in the field is that we are 'obsessed with our own gods' - management being one. We fear the consequences of revealing their nakedness (Mintzberg, 1991). Thus, management is heavily context dependent and more a practice than an application of science. According to Mintzberg this is mainly a reason to move one level up in theorizing. Tengblad is also in line with this criticism, but suggests a turn away from positivism and an embracement of constructivism (Tengblad, 1992).

Even if the work activity school stands on a long research tradition with a number of prominent authors the level of conceptualization remain at the descriptive level. The main contributors to the work activity school are often themselves very disappointed by the lack of

theoretical development accomplished (Carlsson, 1991/[1951], Mintzberg, 1991). Rosemary Steward states (1991) that one way to move forward in the work activity school is to start from the existing categories of managerial activities, improve the method, identify effects of individual and organizational differences and compare the activities of managers in similar jobs preferable against measurable outcomes.

One first step is to draw on existing categories and develop them to the context of political managers as this group has not been investigated systematically before. In Carlsons study of CEOs five categories were used: 1) Place of work, 2) Contacts with persons and institutions, 3) Technique of communication, 4) Nature of question at hand, and 5) Kind of action (p. 34-39). These categories map the location of CEOs (Tengblad, 2002; Carlson, [1951]/1991), the tools of communication (Tengblad, 2002; Carlson, [1951]/1991), the distribution of meetings (Tengblad, 2002; Carlson, [1951]/1991), the functional area of activities (Tengblad, 2002; Carlson, [1951]/1991), and the types of administrative action (Tengblad, 2002; Carlson, [1951]/1991). This has lead to important insights on the fragmentation of time and space in managerial work.

We have attempted to adapt this conceptual to the work of ministers. Categories were developed distinguishing between:

- 1) Meetings a) in parliament and in parliamentary committees b) other meetings with political parties, c) meetings in governmental committees, d) in own parliamentary group of the party, e) other meetings in own party (such as the local party organization), f) meetings with administrators, e) meeting in the EU or internationally.
- 2) Preparation (or meetings reading reports and cases, making drafts and proposals, etc)
- 3) Contact a) with companies and the private sector (visits, meetings and talks), b) with citizens, associations, interest organizations, representation, c) contacts with journalists and media, interviews with TV, radio, d) social media (Facebook, Twitter).
- 4) General updating (reading papers, news etc.).
- 5) Other tasks.

### 3. Method

The classical methods of the work activity school are mainly diaries or shadowing/participant observation (Carlson, 1991[1951]; Dalton, 1959; Mintzberg, 1951; Tenglad, 2002). By applying

these methods you register – or make the managers register – what they do. The quality of this method is to get detailed and contextualized registrations.

This type of method could not directly be applied to Ministers. The diary method cannot be used since ministers are too busy to write diaries, and at the same time they were unlikely to accept to be accompanied by a researcher during the working day registering accurately what they do (see however Fenno 1978).

Inspired by the diary-method - but as the second best option – we chose to use a survey containing a detail schema which on a daily basis made the minister register how they spend their time in a particular week (week 5, 2015) which was judged to be a typical working week. The time spent was registered according to the categories listed earlier.

In addition, the Ministers were asked how much of their time was spent inside versus outside the ministry. Inside the ministries a functional categorization was made according to the following categories a) strategy and policy development, b) making and implementing laws inside the ministerial resort, c) working with budgeting and organization inside the ministry, d) media work in the ministry, e) others. Outside the ministries, the ministers were asked to distinguish between how much time they spent working in a) the parliamentary assembly (Folketinget), b) the government and governmental committees, c) EU and internationally, d) in the parliamentary party group, e) in the media, and f) other activities such as talks, meetings with interest organizations etc.

The distinction between inside versus outside the ministry is made to cast light on how much time the Minister actually spend being in the top of the administrative hierarchy. Here the categories are functional categories drawing on the same function as POSDCORB, that is planning, organization, developing, budgeting etc. The categories applied outside the ministry is attempting to tap into the different arenas which the minister divide his work between outside the ministry. Thus, in line with previous research this maps how time is spent outside the organization.

#### **4. Data collection**

Data for this study was collected in the first quarter of 2015 and stems from work commissioned by a parliamentary Remuneration Committee (Vederlagskommissionen) which was given the task to make recommendations concerning the future payment of mayors, regional council presidents, MPs and ministers. Our data contributed as background material for the Commission's overall work. This paper only draws on the data collected on the ministers, but an encompassing analysis of the full data-set can be found in Bhatti et al., 2016.

The data include both a survey and interviews with ministers. The survey was web-based and sent to all ministers (20 ministers in the government at the time). We received 18 responses from Ministers (response rate of 90%). These response rates are very high, especially when taking into account that the target group is very busy. A major reason for the high response rates was that the survey was backed by the prime minister who directly encouraged her ministers to answer the survey at the weekly meeting of the ministers<sup>1</sup>. The survey was also backed by the Prime Minister's Office.

In addition, to the registration of time in week 5 (described above) the surveys contained items about self-reported work hours, perceived pressure, relationship between work and family and threats and harassment in relation to the job. Generally, we asked both to the current situation and asked for an assessment of how the different working conditions had evolved over time though we will mainly focus on the current situation in the analysis. In the end of the questionnaire we asked for demographic information, including age, years of service, former professional and educational background etc.

A major challenge to the validity of the survey with politicians is that the respondents were aware that the study would be used as part of the work of the Remuneration Committee, and this may have facilitated strategic responses. Thus, long working hours and difficult working conditions reported by the politicians in the survey could be viewed by the committee as an argument for a better payment of politicians. We have tried to counter this by emphasizing the anonymity of answers. The registration of working hours on a day-to-day basis in theory also has worked in favor of correct registrations. It should be noted that a possible incentive to misreport mainly relates to the overall workload. One would not expect respondents to misreport the relative weight given to different work tasks which is the main focus here. It is also worth noting that the responses for mayors corresponded well with responses from previous surveys carried out independent of commission work, while responses for ministers corresponded with findings from other countries. In the qualitative interviews, we did not find indications of strategic responding, and politicians in general shared both positive and negative aspects of their jobs. It is of course not possible, despite our efforts, to be sure that strategic responses have not occurred.

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<sup>1</sup> The prime minister in the first half of 2015 was Helle Thorning Schmidt from the Social Democrats. She led a centre-left government.

Besides the surveys, we conducted interviews with two ministers and two former ministers<sup>2</sup>. Both ministries with a central position in the Government and ministries with a less central position are represented. Furthermore, the respondents had both low and high seniority and we made sure to have respondents of both genders and respondents with and without small children represented in the study. The purpose of the qualitative interviews was on the one hand to evaluate and validate the results from the survey, and on the other hand to obtain qualitative assessments of the working conditions of elite politicians in order to get more in-depth information. The interviews lasted slightly less than one hour, and they took typically place in the office of the respondents. All interviews were recorded and subsequently fully transcribed. The transcription was sent to the respondents for comments if the respondents required this. Comments were very few and did not result in any significant changes.

In the interviews we followed an interview guide. The interview guide contained the same three themes as in the survey: working hours, workload and the public role. This made it possible to link the results of the qualitative interviews directly to the survey.

## **5. Results and discussion**

In the following the results from the survey and the interviews are presented and discussed in relation to insights from the work activity school.

### *Insights from the work-activity school*

One core metaphor from the work-activity school is that rather than being the puppet master who is pulling the strings at the top of the organization, the CEO himself is the puppet being pulled in a number of directions by forces and actors of which he is not in control (Carlsson, 1951). This metaphor is based on an assessment of the level of fragmentation of time and space which have been two main dimensions according to which the working activities of CEOs have been studied (see also Tengblad 2000; 2008), and which also are used to characterize the Ministers' work.

In the following we have listed some of the main insights from the work-activity school:

- 1) The CEO's have too heavy a work load. Carlson finds that the work load of the CEO was too heavy and the working pressure too high. This led to long working days and to sacrifices of their private life. Also the heavy workload made the CEOs rather "narrow" in broader social and cultural affairs (Tengblad, *ibid.*).

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<sup>2</sup> One of the ministers was not currently Minister but had been Minister a number of times. His last period as Minister ended in 2011.

- 2) Carlson also noted the existence of "The diary complex". If something is not put in the calendar it is not carried. The diary of CEO's is completely full and there is a complete lack of undisturbed time. Even the work alone in the office becomes fragmented to a level where there is hardly time to light a cigarette without being disturbed (Carlson, *ibid.*, Tengblad, *ibid.*).
- 3) The situation of right now is always exceptional. Carlson finds that when the CEO explains the situation right now as being exceptional it is a kind of 'wishful thinking'. Carlson is writing with an ambition of being able to improve the administrative processes, and therefore he recommends that rather than retreating to this kind of wishful thinking the CEO should take the actions necessary to handle the problems at hand (Tengblad, *ibid.*).
- 4) The organization does not make sufficient use of committee work. Carlson concluded that the CEO could have more time to think, if there was made better use of secretaries, assistants, telephone operators and physical arrangements (Tengblad, 2000; 2008).
- 5) There is an unwillingness to establish policy. Carlson noted that activities linked to developing policies were very rare, and that CEOs avoided policy decisions as they were difficult and time consuming to make. He saw this as a pathology.

These are among the major findings from the work-activity school. What we still need to find out is if these characteristics of the working day also are found for Ministers and to discuss what their implications for democracy are.

### *Work-activities<sup>3</sup>*

The ministers' total registered working hours during the week are on average 70 hours (in week 5, 2015). If you ask ministers about their working hours in an average week, the answer is quite similar to the data registered in week 5: 67 hours on average. The reported working hours are high for all ministers. Only 17% recorded less than 60 hours in week 5, while only 12% state that their average working hours are less than 60 hours. There is some variation with respect to whether ministers have children living at home. If so the working hours are on average 65 hours compared to 77 hours for ministers without children living at home. However, the difference is not significant at conventional levels in a multivariate model.

**Table 1: Evaluation of the work pressure and stressfulness of public exposure in present position as a Minister**

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<sup>3</sup> Note that the description of the working hours are at the time of the data collection – that is Spring 2015.

	Very low	Somewhat low	Neither low or high	Somewhat high	Very high	Average (scale 1-5 )
Level of work pressure	0%	0%	0%	23%	77%	4,8
Public exposure is stressful for the respondent	8%	15%	31%	46%	0%	3,2
Public exposure is stressful for the family	0%	46%	23%	31%	0%	2,8

n=18. I kolonnen helt til højre er "meget lavt"=1, "I nogen grad lavt"=2, "Hverken lavt eller højt"=3, "I nogen grad højt"=4 og "meget højt"=5.

Even if the ministers do not complain about the long working hours but rather tend to see the long hours as inevitable, they do evaluate the work pressure to be very high (see table 2). Also they see it as self-evident that working hours and pressure at this level does come with a heavy cost for the work-life balance (see table 1).

Even if the ministers are very committed to their jobs they are very aware of the public exposure linked to their job and the stress this puts on both themselves and their families (see table 2). 46% see the public exposure as being stressful to them personally and 31% see it as being stressful to their families. In the interviews a number of ways to safeguard oneself as well as the family is reported. There is a general understanding that even if the ministers experience a pressure from their spin-doctors of strengthening their personal appearance in the media, the ministers are very reluctant to do so as it may be costly for their partners and children. If the press is invited for the wedding, you can also expect them to be there at the funeral and the divorce, as one puts it (#4, appendix 1a). One interpretation of this is that the ministers maintain a narrative of being able to control how much the press report on their personal lives.

**Table 2: Work-life balance**

	Yes, definitely	Yes, to some extent	Yes, but only a little bit	No, not at all	Average (scale 1-4)
Takes energy from private life	46%	46%	8%	0%	3,3
Takes time from private life	61%	31%	8%	0%	3,5

N=13. I kolonnen helt til højre er "Nej, slet ikke"=1, "Ja, men kun lidt"=2, "Ja, til en vis grad"=3, "Ja, helt sikkert"=4.

Table 3 shows the work activities of the ministers during the week (week 5). The parliamentary meeting calendar constitutes a basic structure behind the working activities at 'Borgen' (the Danish parliament). On regular Tuesdays, meetings in assembly hall ('Salen') are held. Most parties also have their group meetings on days where there are meetings in the assembly hall. Thus these two types of meetings are the most time intensive on Tuesdays.

The ministers may spend relatively little time in the assembly hall in comparison with MPs as they more often get clearings<sup>4</sup>, but the time spent in the assembly hall varies according to the amount of legislation passed in the specific jurisdiction. On average the Ministers spend 2,4 hours a week on meetings in Parliament and in the parliamentary committees.

Participating in debates and votes in the assembly hall is not the most important part of the ministers work, as the more important negotiations take place elsewhere. The ministers report that only a few years ago more important work was taking place in the parliamentary committees but today the attendance in the committees is lowering. At the same time, the number of parliamentary consultations (samråd) has been increasing due to changes in the legislation. Even if it is known not to be the place for decision-making and real political negotiation, the show-up is increasing as the media have access and it is an opportunity for the MPs to get media attention.

The more important meetings for the Ministers are in the government committees and settlement circles (forligskredsene) where the spokesmen from the different parties are going to meetings in the ministries (#3). One minister argued that things are moving in a direction where less time is spent on formal meetings and more time is spent on informal meetings (#4, appendix 1a). Thus the main physical location of the meetings is not the parliament. Most time is spent in the Government committees (see table 3).

Wednesday is the main meeting day in Government committees. On average, ministers spend 2,7 hours a week on this type of meetings. There is, however, a large variation according to which committees they sit on. The committee on Economy and Coordination (Økonomi- og Koordinationsudvalget) meet from 9-12am and again from around 2.30 – 6pm. In sheer working time this may add up to 10-12 hours. In addition to this, it takes time to prepare for the meetings. One minister notes that the number of working hours here often are delimited by the late arrival of the readings for the meetings. This is often at 10pm at the evening before the committee meeting, leaving maybe 4-6 hours for preparation. This is the most important and work-intensive of the Government committees (#SCN + BH). It may, however, have been even more work intensive in 2015 as the Government at the time was a broad coalition government and as the committee counted an unusual large amount of members representing the different parties in Government.

On Thursdays, the main meeting activities are with the ministers' own political party group and with government officials. Meetings with the local party organization or other party

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<sup>4</sup> There is a so called clearing agreement between the parliamentary parties, which secures that a large number of MP can be absent from the votes in the assembly without the parliamentary majority being changed.

associations mainly take place Friday, Saturday and Mondays. People who participate in party politics are often volunteers with ordinary jobs. This means that the meetings with the party members are held outside normal working hours when there are fewer meetings at 'Borgen'.

Tabel 3: Work activities distributed on the day of the week (N=18)

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Total
Meetings in Parliament and parliamentary committees	0.0	1.3	0.7	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.4
Other meetings with the political parties in Parliament	0.2	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.0	0.0	2.0
Meetings in Government committees	0.1	0.9	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.7
Meetings in own party group	0.2	1.4	0.7	0.9	1.3	1.0	0.0	5.4
Other meetings in own party (local party organization or other party associations)	1.1	0.1	0.4	0.3	1.1	1.9	0.1	4.8
Meetings with government officials and employees	0.5	1.1	1.0	0.9	0.9	0.0	0.0	4.4
Møder i EU- og internationalt regi	1.4	0.8	0.0	0.7	0.1	0.0	0.0	3.1
Preparation work (preparation in general, reading reports and cases, drafting proposals, etc.)	2.7	2.1	2.3	2.7	1.5	1.4	1.7	14.4
Contact with companies and businesses (ex visits, talks, meetings)	0.8	0.3	0.6	0.4	0.2	0.0	0.1	2.4
Contact with citizens, communities and interest organizations (ex talks, meetings, representation)	1.8	1.2	0.9	1.3	1.4	0.3	0.2	7.2
Contacts with journalists or interviews in RV, radio, newspapers etc.	1.0	0.6	0.7	1.1	1.0	0.9	0.1	5.4
Social media (fx Facebook, Twitter)	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.3	0.3	2.8
General opdating (reading magazines, newsletters, papers etc)	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.7	4.8
Worktasks related to travels and transport not included in categories mentioned above	1.6	0.6	1.3	1.3	0.8	0.7	0.0	6.5
Other tasks	0.1	0.1	0.5	0.1	0.8	0.4	0.1	2.0

If we look in detail at the meeting activities linked to the party, this encompasses meetings where Ministers attend to their constituencies. For some, this is both a local constituency and a multimember constituency (Storkreds). In both cases there may be board meetings once a month. If a minister is a member of the leading committee in the party there will be meetings in the executive committee in the party. This can amount to one Saturday every second month, and committee meetings in the party one Saturday every month (#2, appendix 1a). There are also meetings in the executive committee, typically half a day once a month. In addition, there are internal meetings in the party group in the Parliament. Group meetings take typically up to four hours a week, group management meetings take up one hour a week, plus there are a number of meetings coordinating the activities with the group (#2, appendix 1a). In total, these meetings with your own party is where ministers spend most of their time in meetings.

Meetings in the EU and other international meetings are most frequently on Mondays but this can vary quite a lot.

In the work-activity tradition 'contacts' have also been one of the categories traditionally employed (Carlsson, 1991/[1951]). In contrast to what one may think, the Ministers spend more time on contacts with citizens and interest organizations (7.2 hours), than they do on journalists and the media (5.4 hours) and commercial organizations (2.4 hours). Time is spent on these contact all days of the week.

Table 3 shows the distribution of the workload during the days of the week. As shown in table 1 less than one hour is spent on journalists a day. It does not sound like a lot but the time Ministers spend on media is distributed all across the hours where they are awake. One minister describes how he normally before 6am start the day by hearing the news and by receiving text-messages and a mail with the main press clippings around 6.15am, and then go to bed around 11-12pm after viewing the first press clippings for the next day. Thus the media pressure does not start at 6am but rather at 11-12pm. For some the window for sleep comes down to 5-5.5 hours (#2, appendix 1a).

This may be different for senior ministers who are less dependent on getting media attention. There is a difference in the performance pressure on a senior minister with a brand who is publicly known and has a track-record of political achievements and being a junior minister who yet has to perform. The former Prime minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, instructed his ministers to

hear the news on the radio every morning at 6 AM in order to be able to pan down unwanted stories in the news at 7 AM. One senior minister reports denied to do so and insisted on sleeping until 6.45 putting his mobile on soundless. However, this minister describes continuous calls from the spin-doctor and the pressure of never knowing when you will be torn out of context as the most stressful working condition for a minister (#3). The senior minister recalls the situation in the mid 70'ies with one TV-channel and one radio-channel with a news monopoly as being very foreseeable and as being able to set a new political agenda simply by writing an article in one of the large newspapers (#3). This is in sharp contrast to the situation today where the sending surface has expanded and the media to a much larger extent is controlling what agendas are forwarded in the media and how the politicians appear (#3). Thus the time pressure on the Ministers is not just a matter of having long working hours, but also due to frequent interruptions.

The working hours are unevenly distributed over a normal working year. The ministers on average report to have 6 weeks of holiday per year. Taking the everyday work-pressure into account, it seems quite sensible with such a relatively long holiday.

Working pressure is higher before Christmas and in the spring before the closing of the parliament in May. One minister describes how it is a source of frustration not to be able to get cases treated by the coordination committee for months and the time pressure this creates on law-proposals (#3, appendix 1a). In this way the time pressure on the ministers are seen as being a potential obstacle to the quality of law-making, for instance by not leaving time for public hearings.

Carlson argues that a better use of secretaries and committees could reduce the workload of CEOs considerable. The ministers were asked to what extent they thought that more assistance would reduce their work pressure. Table 4 shows the results.

**Table 4: Would more assistance help reducing the work-load.**

	Very small degree	Small degree	Neither small or high degree	High degree	Very high degree	Average answers (1-5 scale)
Politisk rådgivning	15%	7%	31%	23%	23%	3.3
Professionelle mediefolk	23%	15%	46%	15%	0%	2.5
Sociale medier	23%	31%	31%	8%	8%	2.5

N=13. I in the most right column "very small degree"=1, "small degree"=2, "neither small or high degree"=3, "high degree"=4 and "very high degree"=5.

Increased political counselling is most needed. In general there seems, however, to be a recognition - or resignation - that very little can be done to reduce the work pressure. The real regulating mechanism seems to be what is physically possible to endure.

*A fragmented working day with different working places*

In the analysis of the CEOs, focus has been on how much time the CEOs spend inside and outside their companies (Carlson, *ibid.*, Tengblad, *ibid.*). Applying these categories to our data, the results show that the Ministers spend 59 % of their time in the Ministry and 41% outside the ministry. Knowing that the Ministers report to work 70 hours per week on average, and register 67 working hours in a particular week (week 5) a calculation of the hours spent on each work task can be made accordingly. This indicates that Ministers actually spent 11 hours on strategy and policy development (if the working hours are assumed to be 70 hours a week).

Table 5: Time distributed on work tasks inside the Ministry

	Average.
Strategy and policy development	26.0%
Developing and implementing laws within the jurisdiction of the Ministry	27.3%
Working with the organization under the ministerial jurisdiction	6.2%
Media related work	22.0%
Other work-tasks	22.0%

N=18.

Tabel 6: Time distributed on work tasks outside the Ministry.

	Average
Work in Parliament	18.1%
Work in Government	14.5%
Work in Arbejdet i EU- og internationalt regi	8.7%
Work in the parliamentary group and the party	18.8%
Work in the media	19.0%
Other work-tasks	20.9%

N=18.

Time spent on transport is also considerable. On average the Ministers reported to be using 12 hours a week on transport (week 5) and to be using 66% of this time on work.

## **6. Conclusion and democratic perspectives**

What does the minister do? When working hours are close to 70 hours a week, the simple answer is that the minister is working to the limit of what is possible. Working hours are very long, working tasks are very diversified and fragmented, and the working pressure is quite extreme.

Ministers spend on average around 25 hours in meetings (week 5). The main share of these meetings (approx. 9 hours) are held with the ministers own political party. Meetings with political party members are mainly held outside normal working hours in evenings and weekends. Meetings with government officials and employees are the third largest activity. These meetings are fairly evenly distributed over the working days of the week. Even if meetings in government committees only take 2.7 hours on average, this meeting activity is substantially more time consuming if ministers are members of important and influential committees, e.g. committees on coordination or economy.

A substantial amount of preparation is linked to meeting activities. Preparation amounts to more than 14 hours per week, distributed over all days of the week including Sundays when many prepare for the activities of the coming week. Preparation includes times spend on reading reports and cases, drafting proposals for meetings etc. Work pressure is not just a matter of long working hours. It has also something to do with the fact that Ministers typically are interrupted at almost any time of the day and continually have to be prepared to give comments in the media,. This fragmentation of the working day is much more radical than what Carlson noted as being detrimental to CEOs in his study from 1951.

Carlson tended to see it as a problem that CEOs spent a lot of their time away from the company. However, this is not as big a problem for Ministers. The fragmentation of the working day may be stressful but it is an essential part of the life of a politician since outgoing activities in many cases are important for the constituency and a prerequisite for democracy. Thus fragmentation is space, which may have been a surprising result in Carlson's study, is an inherent part of the job as a minister.

The fact that the heavy workloads known from studies of CEOs are also found among ministers is hardly a surprise. What is more interesting is too discuss the potential implications for

democracy. The survey data mainly contributes with a description of the working life of ministers, whereas the qualitative interviews give some insights into the potential implications for democracy.

Firstly, the workload can influence the balance between politicians and administrators. Comparing the leadership-role of a minister to that of a CEO, one minister makes the point that being a leader normally implies that you solve problems. If you're a politically elected leader then there are a lot of administrative leaders further down in the hierarchy who see it as their job to solve the problems before they end up on the ministers table. The minister has to specify how much he wants to know and how early he wants to get involved in the cases (#2, appendix 1a). The question is how many cases (with a political content) are already solved before they get to the ministers table. The administrators, of course, need to make priorities and take decisions, otherwise too many cases end up at the ministers table.

The number of cases as well as the complexity of the cases is seen as being increasing and this puts an increasingly pressure on the ministers (and administrators) ability to make priorities. The point here is that as the work pressure increases, political matters are increasingly likely to be decided upon by administrators rather than by politicians, and some of these cases may have a matter which is essentially political.

Secondly, Carlsson describes the existence of "The diary complex" and how things which are not put in the calendar are not carried out. The work of the ministers is heavily guided by their calendars. The calendars are run by the secretaries, and the Ministers tend to look at their secretaries as their allies who are guarding and protecting them by keeping their calendar manageable. Basically, Ministers accept having long working hours. Senior ministers report that this has always been the case and see it as a result of 'Parkinsons law', implying that time available always ends up being filled with work tasks (#3). One senior Minister reports how there are three stacks of cases on his desk – one which absolutely has to be done right now, one which has to be done within a very short time span and one stack that would be nice to have done. The last stack is always there, there is always work to be done (#1, appendix 1a). Another minister describes how the worst situation is if you have to cancel an appointment because a request for a new appointment immediately occurs which typically is very difficult to fit in. Thus it is almost impossible for the minister to get off the hook if people have an appointment with him (#3, appendix 1a). This indicates that the ministerial calendar also plays a central role for the work-life of the ministers.

The role of the calendar and the diary complex may have seemed surprising when Carlson made his study in 1951 but this is hardly seen as surprising today. The implication for

democracy is linked to the fact that access to the minister is granted through getting access to his calendar. This is partly controlled by the ministers themselves but certainly also controlled by their secretaries. Secretaries for the ministers act as important gate-keepers protecting the ministers from an even heavier workload. Again the time pressure may leave a larger role to be played by the administration.

Thirdly, the interviews indicated that the increases in the media attention have increased the time-pressure and decreased the politicians' possibility for agenda-setting (#3, appendix 1a). Just a decade or two ago politicians had better possibilities of formulating a policy agenda and for communicating it in the media. Today, the agenda setting is much more media driven and it is more difficult for the ministers to get through with their own agenda in the media. One senior minister describes how he earlier could set a new political agenda writing one coherent article, and how he is struggling today in order not to have to attend to the media before 6.45 in the morning, and yet finds it more difficult to put through a political agenda. The time spend on the media has increased and become more fragmented, and the possibilities for political agenda setting are on the ministers side judged to have become more fragmented.

Fourthly, Carlson noted that the CEOs have little unfragmented time to reflect and to develop new policies. To the extent that this is the case, it is potentially alarming for democracy as the Ministers link the democratic mandate from being elected with the administrative resources of the bureaucracy. One minister quotes the Swedish prime minister Tage Erlander for saying 'När fundera du'? when confronted with a ministers calendar (see også bogen om ministerledelse). This suggests that the time to reflect is heavily squeezed. The same minister recalls travelling to and from Bruxelles as the best opportunity for policy development. While travelling he had uninterrupted time with a qualified administrator setting next to him. Also slightly boring party meetings are mentioned as an occasion for reflection, whereas going into the ministerial office and closing the door is almost certain to create a knock on the door, i.e. an interruption (#3, appendix 1a). Time spent on transportation in the Ministers car is referred to as a rolling office where there is some coherent time for reflection and reading (bogen om ministerledelse). Thus the ministers have ways of creating small pockets of time where they are not contacted. Often geographical space and change of location is used to create these pockets, which can be used for policy development or perhaps spending time with the family for instance by going on holidays (#3, appendix 1a). As such the metaphor developed by Carlson (1991[1951]) of the CEO as a puppet master being pulled by an endless amount of strings – rather than the other way around – also fits the Ministers.

Finally, it may be worth considering the rewards at the top. Do the ministers actually feel that it is worth taking long working hours and worth being exposed to public scrutiny to the extent that is the case today, and has working pressure reached a level where it has detrimental effects to (de)recruitment and causes a bias in democratic representation?

Rewards can be divided into visible and invisible rewards (Hood & Peters, 19xx). The visible rewards is salary and pensions which in Danish case are described in detail in an undated commission work (Vederlagskommissionen, 2016). The interviews cast some light on the Ministers perception of the more invisible rewards. The senior ministers refer to these rewards as legislation which they have left important fingermarks on, while ministers with less seniority refer to the unique opportunity to make a difference (KJ, HD, BH, SCN).

One former minister underlined that visible and tangible rewards (salary, pensions) are higher elsewhere, and ministers complain about the intangible negative sides in the form of problems with work life balance. At the same time, they always end up stating that they miss the excitement and the possibility of making a difference linked to policy making when stopping as ministers. Thus there is certainly a selection bias into being a Minister as it requires a number of skills and the ability to tolerate long working hours, but there is also a selection of people who is committed to working for their perception of the public interest and to leaving durable fingerprints on society.

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# Appendix 1A – List of interviews

The following Ministers were interviewed at the time of the data-collection (spring 2015).

- #1, Minister from the Social Democratic party (senior) (S)
- #2, minister from the social liberal party (junior) (RV)
- #3, former minister (senior) from the liberal party (V)
- #4, former minister (junior) from the liberal party (V)