

# Central Bank Independence and Monetary Policymaking Institutions - Past Present and Future\*

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## 1 Introduction

Twenty years ago and earlier most central banks in the world functioned as departments of ministries of finance. They were expected, by law custom or both, to utilize their policy instruments to achieve a myriad of objectives like high levels of growth and employment, provision of funds to government for the financing of public expenditures and to address balance of payments problems.<sup>1</sup> They also were expected to maintain financial and price stability but the price stability objective was one among several other objectives in the charter of the Bank and had no particular status. In some cases like Spain and Norway it did not even appear in the charter. Paralleling this state of affairs economic theory did not attribute particular importance to central bank independence (CBI) and the concept of credibility of monetary policy was in early stages of development. Furthermore, a notable legacy of the Keynesian revolution was the belief that a certain amount of inflation is conducive to economic growth.

Although some banks had a reasonable amount of legal independence the level of actual independence, particularly in developing countries was usually lower than the one indicated in the law. Except for a few cases central banks did not possess instrument independence and the

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<sup>1</sup>In the case of many developing countries the central bank often functioned as a development bank that provided subsidized loans to various sectors of the economy.

responsibility for price stability was, at least implicitly, located in the ministry of finance and other economic branches of government. In a few developed economies (like the UK, Japan, the US and West Germany) with wide capital markets price stability was maintained mainly through the actions of relatively conservative treasury departments or because of *de-facto* independent central banks.<sup>2</sup>

Most other countries that enjoyed reasonable levels of price stability achieved this result by pegging their currencies to the currency of a country with sufficiently conservative aggregate nominal policies. Under the Bretton Woods system most currencies were automatically pegged to the US \$. Following the breakdown of this system in the seventies many countries adopted unilaterals pegs and later on, bands. Countries without either of those three commitment devices endured prolonged episodes of high and variable inflation as exemplified by the cases of Argentina, Brazil, Israel, Mexico, Chile and other countries.

The contrast of this state of affairs with current (fall 2005) practice and academic consensus with respect to CBI cannot be overemphasized. Most central banks in today's world enjoy substantially higher levels of both legal and actual independence than twenty years ago or earlier. CBI and accompanying institutional arrangements like inflation targeting have become widely accepted commitment devices. In spite of some contentious issues the following broad practical consensus backed by academic work has emerged. The primary responsibility of the central bank (CB) is to assure price stability and financial stability. Without prejudice to these objectives the CB should support the economic policies of government. To achieve its main objective the bank is given instrument independence.<sup>3</sup> Delegation of authority to a non elected institution should be accompanied by accountability and transparency. It is noteworthy that those two buzz words of modern monetary institutions were hardly heard twenty years ago or earlier. In the absence of independence accountability was unnecessary and, as political entities, governments and ministries of finance had no incentives to raise questions about their own transparency in the conduct of monetary policy.

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<sup>2</sup>Partly because of the US wide capital markets, the *de-facto* independence of the Federal Reserve was higher than its legal independence. At the time West Germany Bundesbank was unique in that it enjoyed both *de-jure* as well as *de-facto* independence.

<sup>3</sup>In a few case like the ECB and the Banco Central de Chile, the bank is even given some limited goal independence in the sense that it is free to determine its own inflation target.

Section 2 quickly reviews the institutional changes that have occurred in the area of central bank autonomy and related monetary policymaking institutions in the world during the last twenty years. It discusses some of the reasons for those developments and provides an overview of accumulated empirical evidence on the relation between CBI and the performance of the economy. Section 3 opens with a discussion of some of the lessons from stabilization of inflation and proceeds to consider the issue of CBI within the broader context of choice of nominal anchor. Section 4 briefly reviews a recent literature which considers the impact of effective conservativeness or independence on economic performance in the presence of labor unions.<sup>4</sup> A main insight of this literature is that, in the presence of large wage setters, CBI affects real variables like the rate of unemployment implying that conservativeness affects economic performance even in the long run.

Section 5 closes the lecture by considering future challenges facing central banks. Price stability is now a permanent fixture of industrial economies and of many developing economies, and CBI is a well established feature of the contemporary monetary order. Starting from the presumption that those features are here to stay, the discussion in this part focusses on issues relating to the conduct of monetary policy by independent central banks in an era of price stability. In such times the bank is naturally expected to devote more attention to stabilization of the output gap. The lecture discusses the risks associated with such a flexible inflation targeting regime. In the presence of independent central banks issues of accountability and transparency assume higher importance than in the past. In some instances a trade-off between democratic accountability and CBI may arise. This occurs, for example, when, due to its obligation to maintain financial stability, the CB engages in operations that lead to substantial losses. A closely related issue is the distribution of CB profits and losses between the CB and government and the optimal level of CB capital. The section reviews this, hitherto, relatively neglected issue.

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<sup>4</sup>Although related independence and conservativeness are not quite the same. Independence refers to the ability of the bank to implement the policies it desires without political interferences. Conservativeness refers to the importance that the bank assigns to price stability in comparison to real objectives like high levels of economic activity and employment. Obviously, effective conservativeness, that determines policy choices, depends both on the bank's conservativeness, as well as on its independence. For simplicity I use the terms conservativeness and independence interchangeably to mean "effective conservativeness".

## 2 The evolution of CBI over the last two decades : evidence, reasons and consequences

### 2.1 Evolution of CBI

The most widely available indices of CBI refer to the level of independence as specified in the law. It is well known that actual independence may often deviate, quite substantially, from legal independence. Such deviations are more important in developing than in industrial economies. This is probably due to better enforcement of the law in the first group of economies.<sup>5</sup> Other, more behaviorally oriented proxies, have therefore been used. One, used only for developing countries, is the actual, as opposed to the legally mandated, turnover of CB governors and the other is a proxy for the political vulnerability of the CB governor. This index is defined as the frequency of cases in which the governor is replaced within a short period of time following a political transition.<sup>6</sup> None of those indices fully represents the actual independence of the CB. But, taken together, they provide a more complete picture of differences in CBI across countries and over time.

There is mounting evidence that the legal independence of most central banks in the world has increased during the nineties to an extent that appears to be a veritable revolution in central bank legislation. This is particularly remarkable in view of the fact that during the forty years ending in 1989 there hardly had been reforms in CB legislation. This statement is based on a number of legal indices the most comprehensive of which are those in chapter 19 of Cukierman (1992) and in Cukierman, Webb and Neyapti (1992), on updates and extensions of these indices for some subgroups of countries and on updates of the Grilli, Masciandaro and Tabellini (1991) index.<sup>7</sup> The Cukierman, Webb and Neyapti (1992) index has been updated

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<sup>5</sup>Using data till the end of the eighties Cukierman (1992, Ch. 19) documents a negative correlation between inflation and legal independence in developed economies but no significant relation between those two variables in developing countries. More recent evidence surveyed below suggests that the difference between actual and legal independence may also vary over time within a given country.

<sup>6</sup>The turnover variable is introduced in chapter 19 of Cukierman (1992) and in Cukierman, Webb and Neyapti (1992). The index of political vulnerability appears in Cukierman and Webb (1995).

<sup>7</sup>This index is based on a coding of sixteen different characteristics of CB charters that pertain to the allocation of authority over monetary policy, procedures for resolution of conflicts between the CB and government, the relative importance of price stability in CB objectives as stated in the law, the seriousness of limitations on lending by the CB to government, and procedures for the appointment and dismissal of the governor of the CB.

for twenty six former socialist economies for the decade of the nineties by Cukierman, Miller and Neyapti (2002). A somewhat broader index for twenty four Latin American and Caribbean countries was recently developed by Jacome and Vazquez (2005).<sup>8</sup> The Grilli, Masciandaro and Tabellini index has been reconstructed for a sample of over forty countries for two points in time; 1991 and the end of 2003 by Arnone, Laurens and Segalotto (2005).

In spite of some differences in coverage, definitions and the fact that not all indices have been updated for all countries the broad picture that emerges is that legal independence took a quantum upward jump during the nineties. The most direct evidence for this appears in the Arnone, Laurens and Segalotto (2005) paper that provides data for both 1991 and 2003. In addition comparison of legal independence of the CB in the former socialist economies with that of developed economies in the eighties by Cukierman, Miller and Neyapti (2002) show a substantially higher level of independence in the former group. Interestingly, table 2 in that paper suggests that in about a third of the former socialist economies legal independence in the nineties was higher than the legal independence of the highly independent Bundesbank during the eighties. In line with the Maastricht Treaty the legal independence of the Bundesbank has also been upgraded since the eighties, along with that of all the countries that joined the EMU.

Have there also been meaningful changes in the actual level of CBI as proxied by the actual turnover of CB governors and by the index of political vulnerability of the CB during the nineties? Since there have not been systematic updates of those data sets since the work of Cukierman (1992), Cukierman, Webb and Neyapti (1992) and Cukierman and Webb (1995) the picture is not as clear cut. But, casual evidence for Latin American countries in which turnover and the political vulnerability of the CB were among the highest in the world till the end of the eighties points to a substantial increase in independence as proxied by those behavioral indices

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Cukierman, Webb and Neyapti (1992) present a weighted index of those sixteen characteristics (LVAW) and Cukierman (1992) presents an unweighted version of the same characteristics (LVAU). Both indices refer to a sample of over sixty countries.

Other indices that appeared till the beginning of the nineties such as those used by Bade and Parkin (1988), Alesina (1988,1989, 1993), Grilli, Masciandaro and Tabellini (1991) and Eijffinger and Schaling (1993) can, for the most part, be approximated by subsets of the components of the LVAW (or of the LVAU) index.

<sup>8</sup>The additional features included in the Jacome-Vazquez index involve procedures for appointment and dismissal of the entire CB board rather than just the governor, the extent to which the CB has a say with respect to exchange rate policy, the obligations of the CB as a lender of last resort, the existence of provisions for the preservation of CB capital and the existence of legal provisions relating to the accountability and transparency of the CB.

as well.

In addition to legal status, actual independence depends on various formal and informal institutional arrangements like the type of exchange rate regime, the ability of the bank to engage effectively in open market operations, the stance of fiscal policy and the existence of explicit institutional arrangements beyond the law that make the price stability objective a recognized (mainly by the political establishment) objective of the CB. A prominent example of the latter is the various inflation targeting methods adopted by about twenty countries since this innovation has been pioneered at the end of the eighties in New-Zealand and Canada.

Cukierman (Forthcoming) constructs a judgemental index of actual CBI for the Bank of Israel since its creation in 1954 which takes the factors above and several others into consideration. Comparison of this index of actual independence with its legal counterpart suggests that, in spite of relatively limited changes in legal independence, there have been substantial changes in the actual independence of the Bank following the stabilization of high inflation in 1985. In particular, while actual independence was substantially lower prior to, and several year following the 1985 stabilization, the relation between those two types of independence was permanently reversed since the mid nineties. This case study suggests that substantial changes in the actual independence of the Bank may occur without much change in legal independence. A similar qualitative process occurred during the nineties at the Bank of England. The Bank started to enjoy more independence already in the early nineties when inflation targets were introduced and the upgrade in legal independence followed only during the second half of the nineties.

In summary, the evidence surveyed above supports the conclusion that there has been during the nineties a world wide sustained increase in the levels of both legal and actual independence.

## **2.2 Why did CBI increase so much during the nineties?**

The trend towards CBI is due to a combination of global as well as regional factors. This subsection briefly reviews the main factors.<sup>9</sup> Two main global factors underlie the trend towards higher CBI. One is an increased world wide quest for price stability triggered by the stagflation

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<sup>9</sup>A more extensive but older discussion appears in Cukierman (1998)

of the seventies and the dismal economic performance of some high inflation countries, in Latin America and elsewhere. Contrary to the sixties and the seventies, the accepted view during the eighties and the nineties, became that inflation and the associated uncertainties retard growth. The relatively good real performance of some low inflation countries like Germany and Japan till the eighties supported this view.

The second factor is globalization, the gradual dismantling of controls on capital flows and the associated widening of international capital markets. Those processes reenforced the quest for price stability and raised the importance of CBI as a signal of macroeconomic nominal responsibility to domestic and international investors. As argued by Maxfield (1998) this factor was particularly important in developing countries whose political establishments were anxious to establish smooth access to international capital markets. Relatedly, the IMF embraced the view that a high level of independence is a desirable institutional feature and actively promoted CB reform in many developing economies through conditionality and other means.

Among the regional motives for increasing independence are: First, the breakdown of other institutions designed to safeguard nominal stability like the European Monetary System (EMS) and the Bretton Wood System intensified the search for alternative institutions. Second, the good track record of the highly independent Bundesbank demonstrated that CBI can function as an effective device for assuring nominal stability. Third, the acceptance of the Maastricht Treaty by the European Economic Community (EEC) implied that in order to conform with the Treaty many countries in the Community had to upgrade the independence of their CB as a precondition for membership in EMU. The fact that such a stipulation has been introduced in the Treaty in the first place is related to the good record of the Bundesbank and to the central position of Germany within the Community. Fourth, after recent successful stabilization of inflation, particularly in Latin America, policymakers were looking for institutional arrangements capable of reducing the likelihood of high and persistent inflation in the future. In view of the experience available at the time, raising CBI was a natural way to achieve this objective. Fifth, the upgrading of CBI and the creation of best practice Western type central banks in the former socialist countries was part of a more general attempt by these countries to create the institutional framework needed for the orderly functioning of a market economy. The fact that many of these new central banks were granted substantial *de-jure* independence was no doubt motivated

by evidence from the industrial economies suggesting that inflation and legal independence are negatively related and that independence and growth are either positively related or unrelated (see next subsection).

The discussion above still leaves open the question as to why did many countries choose to raise their commitment to price stability by upgrading CBI rather than through other means like unilateral pegs? This question is discussed in subsection 3.4 within the context of choice of nominal anchor.

## **2.3 CBI and economic performance**

This subsection briefly surveys existing evidence on the relation between CBI and economic performance in the areas of inflation, growth, investment, real rates and accommodation.

### **2.3.1 Inflation**

The early evidence in Alesina and Summers (1993), Grilli, Masciandaro and Tabellini (1991), Cukierman (1992, ch. 19) and Cukierman, Webb and Neyapti (1992) suggests that, for the industrial economies, inflation and legal independence are negatively related. By contrast in the group of developing countries neither inflation, nor growth are related to legal independence. This is most likely due to the fact that, at least till the early nineties there was hardly any link between actual and legal independence within this group of countries. When behaviorally oriented proxies of independence like the actual turnover of CB governors and the index of political vulnerability are used, a negative relation between inflation and independence emerges within the group of developing countries as well (Cukierman (1992, ch. 19), Cukierman, Webb and Neyapti (1992) and Cukierman and Webb).

Using data on the legal independence of freshly created central banks in former socialist economies (FSE) during the nineties, and controlling for cumulative liberalization, price decontrols and wars, Cukierman, Miller and Neyapti (2002) find no relation between inflation and legal independence during the initial stages of liberalization. However, once the process of privatization and liberalization of domestic prices and of foreign trade becomes sufficiently large and sustained, a negative relation between inflation and legal independence does emerge. A

possible reason is that legal independence is enforced in practice only when the shift to a market economy has become sufficiently important to induce the authorities to seriously engage in law enforcement.

For the Latin American and Caribbean countries during the nineties, and controlling for international inflation, banking crises and the exchange rate regime, Jacome and Vazquez (2005) find a negative relation between inflation and legal independence. For a similar group of countries and time period Gutierrez (2003) finds that countries that entrench the legal independence of the CB in the constitution have lower inflation than those that do not.

Is there a general lesson from those different empirical investigations? The evidence is consistent with the conclusion that inflation and **actual** CBI are negatively related in both developed and developing countries. But the extent to which this basic relation is also reflected as a negative relation between inflation and **legal** independence depends on several other factors like regard for the law and the degree of commitment to CBI as proxied, *inter alias*, by whether or not the CB charter is entrenched in the constitution.

One may argue that the negative relation between independence and inflation arises because of reverse causality from inflation to independence rather than from independence to inflation. It is hard to resolve this important question on the basis of existing evidence. Using data on legal independence for the Latin American and Caribbean countries during the nineties Jacome and Vazquez (2005) do not find evidence to support causality from legal independence to inflation. But for earlier periods Cukierman (1992, ch. 20, section 7), using governors' turnover as a proxy for actual (lack of) independence, finds evidence in favor of two ways causality between turnover and inflation. My own gut feeling is that, in many cases, causality operates in both directions.

### **2.3.2 Growth and investment**

For developed economies Grilli, Masciandaro and Tabellini (1991) found that real growth and CBI are unrelated. This led them to label CBI a "free lunch". Those results are corroborated in studies by Alesina and Summers (1993) and Cukierman, Kalaitzidakis, Summers and Webb (1993).

For developing economies the last paper finds that, although there is no association be-

tween legal independence and the rate of growth of per capita income, the association between growth and actual independence as proxied by the political vulnerability of the CB and related measures of turnover has a positive impact on the rate of growth. More precisely, using data from the sixties to the eighties and controlling, *inter alias*, for initial GDP, the change in terms of trade, initial primary and secondary enrollment ratios, it is found that higher political vulnerability of the CB governor and related measures of turnover are negatively associated with per capita growth.

For a subset of developing countries Cukierman et. al. (1993) also find, in some cases, a similar negative impact of turnover on the share of investment in GDP. A possible joint interpretation of the last two results is that, under weak central bankers, private investments are lower reducing the long run rate of growth.

### **2.3.3 The distribution of nominal and real rates of interest**

Alesina and Summers (1993) and Cukierman et. al. (1993) find that, in developed economies the variability of both nominal and real rates of interest is negatively associated with legal independence. The second paper also finds, for the decade of the eighties, that the average real return to depositors was higher in developed economies with higher levels of legal independence.

For developing countries Cukierman et. al. (1993) find that the variability of both nominal and real deposit rates of interest is positively associated with the turnover of CB governors.

The broad conclusion from those finding is that the variabilities of both real and nominal rates of interest are lower, and that the average real return to depositors is higher, in countries with higher levels of **actual** independence.

### **2.3.4 Accommodation of wage increases**

Evidence presented in Cukierman, Rodriguez and Webb (1998) for the period between the sixties and the eighties suggests that central banks of industrial economies with higher levels of legal independence accommodate nominal wage increases to a lesser extent. This result is obtained in two stages. First, an over time regression of the rate of increase in high powered money on the rate of increase of nominal wages, controlling for the phase of the cycle and several other

variables, is run for each country. The t statistics of the coefficients of the rates of increase in wages from the country regressions are then taken as proxies for the degree of accommodation and related, cross sectionally, to the levels of legal independence.<sup>10</sup> This second stage regression yields a negative association between the significance adjusted coefficients of accommodation and legal independence.

This finding is consistent with Rogoff's (1985) theory that more effectively conservative, or independent, central banks accommodate wage increases to a lesser extent.

### **3 Remarks on disinflation and the changing structure of nominal anchors**

#### **3.1 "Shock" versus gradual stabilizations and the role of the CB**

During the last two decades many high inflation countries, the world over, stabilized inflation. Some of those stabilizations were of the "shock" or "cold turkey" type and others were gradual. Some involved the ministry of finance and even the entire government while others were implemented mainly by the CB. Two regularities appear to emerge from those experiences. First, by and large, very high inflations at rates over one hundred percent were stabilized by using the first method whereas stabilizations of inflation in the two digit range were implemented gradually. Second, government involvement in the stabilization of high inflation was usually larger when high inflations were stabilized whereas low inflations were stabilized mainly, or solely, by the CB.

Thus, the stabilization of low inflation by industrial countries following the oil shocks of the seventies was done gradually and usually with relatively little involvement of the government. Similarly, the stabilization of low inflation in Chile since the beginning of the nineties was done gradually mainly by the CB. By contrast the stabilizations of high inflation in Bolivia, Argentina and Israel during the eighties were of the cold turkey type and featured a substantial involvement of government. Interestingly, Israel went through both types of stabilizations at different times.

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<sup>10</sup>The statistics of the coefficients rather than the coefficients are utilized in order to reflect the magnitude, **as well as** the significance of each coefficient in the second stage cross sectional regression.

The cold turkey 1985 stabilization that permanently reduced inflation from the three digit range to between ten and twenty percent per annum was led by government to the point that the minister of finance and the prime minister were personally involved. On the other hand the next phase of stabilization, that took place over the decade of the nineties and reduced inflation to the zero to two percent range, was done mainly by the CB in spite of occasional criticisms of the bank's restrictive policy by the minister of finance.

In what follows I argue that those regularities are not accidental for two reasons. First, under high and persistent inflation the public's belief in the seriousness of policymakers' commitment to price stability is likely to be substantially lower than under low inflations, or using terminology borrowed from Barro (1986) and Cukierman and Liviatan (1991), the initial "reputation" of policymakers is lower in the second case. Reputation is defined formally in those papers as the probability,  $\beta$ , that the public attributes to the event that the policymaker in office intends to deliver the inflation target that he preannounces. When  $\beta$  equals one reputation is perfect and when it is zero reputation is non existent. In most real life situations  $\beta$  is obviously between strictly between zero and one. The reason reputation is imperfect is that the policymaker in office can be of two types. A dependable one who takes the inflation target as a commitment to set the policy instrument in a way that will make inflation as near to the target as possible, and a weak type who mimics the announcement of his dependable counterpart, but is really not committed, and is therefore subject to the classical KPBG inflation bias problem.<sup>11</sup> Both types share an identical objective function which is increasing in unexpected inflation and decreasing in inflation.

Cukierman (2000) extends those frameworks to allow for imperfect control of inflation by policymakers. An important consequence of imperfect control is that the opportunistic policymaker can engage in short term discretionary policies without being revealed as weak with probability one. In such an environment the public adjusts  $\beta$  gradually using Bayes rule. However when sufficiently extreme rates of inflation occur reputation takes a jump. In particular, following the realization of a sufficiently high rate of inflation the policymaker loses all reputation and following the realization of a sufficiently low rate of inflation he establishes his

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<sup>11</sup>KPBG stands for Kydland and Prescott (1977) and Barro and Gordon (1983).

credentials as being dependable with probability one. Both policymakers types aspire towards higher reputation since the impact of the preannounced inflation target is higher when reputation is higher and this raises the value of their objectives. When in office, the dependable policymaker attempts to raise his reputation by announcing and implementing a sufficiently low inflation target in order to increase the probability that his dependability will be subsequently revealed with probability one. When in office, the weak policymaker attempts to preserve his existing reputation by mimicking his dependable counterpart in the preannouncement of the target and by scaling down the rate of inflation he aims at a level below the one period discretionary rate.

Stabilization of inflation brings with it long term benefits at the cost of abandoning short term advantages associated with the creation of unanticipated inflation under discretion. One can therefore think of the onset of a drive for stabilization as an increase in the concern of policymakers for future, relatively to current objectives and model it as an increase in the (common to both types) discount factor,  $\delta$ . The framework above implies that when a dependable policymaker is in office and  $\delta$  goes up, raising the incentive to implement a stabilization, the type of stabilization chosen by the dependable type will depend on the initial level of reputation. In particular, a shock treatment is more likely when initial reputation is sufficiently low and gradual stabilization is more likely when it is sufficiently high (proposition 6 in Cukierman (2000)).

The intuition underlying this result is the following. An increase in the discount factor makes the future more important and induces **both** types, when in office, to inflate at lower rates. When reputation is sufficiently low the reduction in planned inflation by the dependable type (D) is larger than the reduction in planned inflation by the weak type (W) because, at a low reputation, D stands to gain relatively more from full separation than W stands to lose from it at the margin. As a consequence the probability of a shock treatment after which D's is clearly separated from his weak counterpart is higher than that of gradual stabilization. When initial reputation is sufficiently high W stands to lose relatively more than what D stands to gain from full separation. Hence, when the future becomes more important, W makes a relatively stronger effort to prevent full separation than the effort made by D to establish his identity beyond any doubt. As a consequence the probability of gradual stabilization is higher than that of a shock

treatment.

A second factor that affects the relative desirability of shock versus gradual stabilization under moderate versus high inflation is related to the existence of nominal wage contracts and other temporary nominal rigidities. In particular, when initial inflation is sufficiently high the structure of overlapping sticky wages and prices is very compressed. As a consequence the relative price distortions associated with a shock treatment are relatively small. By contrast, when initial inflation is moderate the structure of overlapping wage contracts and prices is spread out making the relative price distortions associated with a shock treatment higher and more persistent. Hence gradual stabilizations are relatively more attractive in this case.

Why do government tend to be more heavily involved in the stabilization of high inflations whereas low inflations are frequently stabilized mainly by the CB. There are several reasons. First, the root cause of high inflation is usually due to government's fiscal imbalances and the need to finance them through seigniorage. In the presence of limited government access to credit markets such needs often create high inflations (Bolivia in the first half of the eighties is an example). Since the root cause of the problem resides in government's fiscal needs the solution must involve government.

Second, even when the root cause resides elsewhere, once high inflation has been allowed to develop, it is quite likely that the CB alone will not be able to do the job for several reasons. In such cases, without a clear cut demonstration of fiscal responsibility by government, the low reputation of policymakers makes it extremely hard for the CB to convince the public that a change in regime is around the corner. This is reenforced by the fact that, during high inflation the independence of the CB is low. In addition if, as was the case in countries like Chile and Israel indexation is widespread at the outset and a shock stabilization is implemented, some or all of the indexation arrangements have to be temporarily suspended. Clearly, actions of this type are not within the arsenal of instruments of the CB. They require, instead, the involvement of government and other groups like labor unions.

## 3.2 Inflation targets, gradual stabilization and asymmetric CB objectives

During the last decade much of the academic research dealing with CB reaction functions has been cast in terms of Taylor rules. For the most part these rules assume that the CB loss function is quadratic in the output gap and in the deviation of inflation from its target.<sup>12</sup> This formulation leads to nice linear reaction functions and implies that the CB treats losses from being above and being below target with respect to both inflation and output in a symmetric manner. In the absence of uncertainty about future shocks possible asymmetries in losses do not matter. However when it is recognized that real life central banks are uncertain about future shocks when they pick their policy instruments the shape of the objective function over the entire possible range of losses becomes important.

After a period as vice chairman of the Fed Blinder (1998, pp. 19, 20) suggests that "... in most situations the CB will take far more political heat when it tightens preemptively to avoid higher inflation than when it eases preemptively to avoid higher unemployment". Although the Fed enjoys a fair amount of actual independence it is not totally insensitive to the reactions of the political establishment and the public. It is therefore likely that, in making policy decisions, the Fed may weight losses from negative output gaps more heavily than losses (if any) from positive output gaps. Cukierman (2000) formalizes this asymmetry by postulating that the CB is concerned with losses arising from negative output gaps but is indifferent to the size of the gap as long as it is positive and shows that, in such a case, there will be an inflation bias even if the bank aims at achieving potential output on average. Using cross sectional data from industrial economies Cukierman and Gerlach (2003) find support for this theory. Using a more general specification of asymmetric output gap objectives Ruge-Murcia (2003) finds that such a specification fits the behavior of US inflation better than the traditional Barro Gordon (1983) model which relies on quadratic objectives.

It might appear, at first blush, that there should be no reason for asymmetries in losses from the discrepancies between inflation and the inflation target (briefly - "the inflation gap"). However in periods of gradual disinflation, in which the CB is anxious to establish a reputation

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<sup>12</sup>See for example Taylor (1999) and, for Latin America, Loayza and Schmidt-Hebbel (2002).

for being committed to the target, it may be more apprehensive of positive than of negative inflation gaps. Hence during such periods the Bank may follow policies which make it more likely that the inflation target will be missed from below than from above. Interestingly, during the gradual Israeli disinflation at the end of the nineties and the beginning of the twenty first century, the bank missed the target many more times from below than from above.<sup>13</sup> A similar phenomenon occurred in the UK during the inflation targeting period.

Essentially asymmetries in losses from inflation and output gaps reflect precautionary motives on the part of the CB with respect to those gaps. Such motives generally lead to non linear Taylor rules. Cukierman and Muscatelli (2003) incorporate these precautionary motives into a New-Keynesian framework of the type suggested by Clarida, Gali and Gertler (2000) and test for the existence of non linearities in the interest rate reaction functions of the US, the UK, Germany and Japan. They find evidence of non linearities and the existence of at least one precautionary motive in the first three countries.

In times of stable inflation, as is the case in the US, since the mid eighties, the precautionary demand for expansions (or for the avoidance of recessions) may dominate. In times of inflation stabilization the precautionary demand for price stability and reputation may dominate. In the presence of both precautionary motives the reaction function may still be linear because the two precautionary motives distort the conventional linear Taylor rule in opposite directions. A precautionary motive for expansion alone tends to make the Taylor rule concave in both gaps and a precautionary demand for price stability alone tends to make it convex in both gaps. Hence, in the presence of both motives, the Taylor rule will be non linear if one of those motives dominates the other.

Cukierman and Muscatelli (2003) develop a criterion for finding the dominant precautionary motive and apply it to the four countries mentioned above. They find that the identity of the dominant precautionary motive in the US and the UK has varied over time. In particular, when the period of Volcker's disinflation is included in the sample there is evidence in favor of a dominant precautionary demand for price stability in the US. However, when only the post 1985 period, characterized by low and relatively stable inflation is considered, a dominant

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<sup>13</sup>This even led some critics of the Bank to claim that the Bank was aiming at an inflation target that was lower than the one assigned to it by government (Sussman (Forthcoming)).

precautionary demand for expansions emerges. The opposite occurs in the UK that stabilized inflation only during the nineties. When the entire sample, covering the period 1980 - 2000, is included there is evidence of a precautionary demand for expansions. When only the period after 1985 is considered a precautionary demand for price stability emerges in the UK. German monetary policy is consistently characterized by a precautionary demand for price stability over the sample.

The more general lesson from those findings is that the loss functions of central banks are likely to change when the economic environment changes.

### **3.3 Changes in the transmission process in the aftermath of successful stabilizations**

Although they are desirable, successful stabilizations temporarily complicate the conduct of monetary policy. The reason is that such stabilizations induce changes in the transmission process of monetary policy through a variety of channels. Wages and prices become more sticky, the degrees of informal and formal indexation go down and the passthrough coefficient and dollarization go down as well. All those phenomena have taken place in Israel following the success of inflation targeting in reducing inflation to the current standards of Europe and the US. Schmidt-Hebbel (2004) documents similar trends for Chile.

Those changes leads to a lengthening of the transmission of monetary impulses to inflation and the real effects of monetary policy become more persistent. Since they raise the ability of monetary policy to affect output and employment, those are desirable developments. On the other hand those structural changes make pre disinflation knowledge about the precise magnitudes of the coefficients of the transmission mechanism somewhat obsolete and raise the CB uncertainty concerning the structure of the economy. As a consequence, during several years following successful stabilizations, monetary policymakers are forced to rely more heavily on various judgemental procedures and on a larger amount of relatively partial signals about the impact of monetary policy.

### 3.4 CBI cum inflation targets versus exchange rate anchors

Price stability can be achieved through a variety of anchors. Delegation of authority to an independent and sufficiently conservative CB (with or without explicit targeting of inflation) is one type of anchor and some level of commitment to a unilateral peg is another one. Different countries have utilized, or still are utilizing, one or the other, or some combination, or variation of those anchors. The last fifteen years have witnessed a substantial reshuffling of nominal anchors.<sup>14</sup> Some countries in Latin America and elsewhere have gradually shifted from an exchange rate anchor to effective CBI augmented by explicit inflation targeting.<sup>15</sup> Other countries like those joining the Euro area strengthened their commitment to permanently fixed pegs by creating the EMU. China continues to maintain an implicit fixed peg and so do some countries in the far East.

An argument often advanced in favor of replacing exchange rate based anchors by CBI and explicit or implicit inflation targeting are that this makes it possible to utilize monetary policy for domestic stabilization purposes. However, the flexibility required for stabilization policy can also be achieved by exchange rate bands at the cost of occasional abandonment of the band. For a given level of reputation Cukierman, Spiegel and Leiderman (2004) discuss some of the factors that determine the choice of band width and the associated point along the tradeoff between flexibility and credibility. An analogous, although not quite identical, tradeoff arises under an independent CB with inflation targets. Here this tradeoff is determined by the degree of targeting flexibility of the bank which depends on its conservativeness. By allowing larger and more sustained deviations of inflation from its target a less conservative CB leaves more flexibility for stabilization policy which is analogous to a wider exchange rate band.

A second argument against exchange rate anchors is that, in the current era of free capital mobility, the level of foreign exchange reserves needed to defend a fixed peg is likely to be prohibitive more often than before. This was vividly illustrated by the 1998 currency crises. Again, if one wishes to maintain flexibility this can be achieved by widening the band. In spite of this many developing economies still peg their currencies to some key currency (Calvo

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<sup>14</sup>The two ways changes that have occurred, world wide, in the use of exchange rate based anchors during the nineties are discussed in Fischer (2001).

<sup>15</sup>Corbo (2002) discusses the reasons for these changes for Latin American countries.

and Reinhard (2002)). Those remarks are consistent with the view that different anchors are appropriate for different countries, as well as for the same country in different time periods.

Interestingly, independently of whether they use an exchange rate anchor, a dirty float, a band, a diagonal peg or a freely floating exchange rate, most countries have upgraded the legal independence of their central banks during the nineties. Thus, it appears that legal independence of the CB has come to be considered as desirable even if some type of exchange rate anchor is being used. But the likelihood that this legal independence translates into actual independence is higher the looser is the exchange rate anchor.

## 4 The role of central bank independence in unionized economies

The literature on credibility and endogenous monetary policy that followed the lead of Kydland and Prescott (1977) and Barro and Gordon (1983) (KPBG in the sequel) implicitly assumes that all markets, and in particular the labor market, are competitive. A basic consequence of this assumption is that the conservativeness, or effective independence, of the CB affects inflation and the extent of countercyclical policy, but not the long run, or potential level of output and employment. In other words, in the absence of cyclical shocks, the level of CB independence is neutral with respect to the real economy in the same sense that money is neutral in classical monetary discussions like that of Patinkin (1963). The last ten years have witnessed the emergence of a new literature that considers the impact of monetary and labor market institutions on the economy in the presence of large wage setter like labor unions. This section reviews very briefly some of its main ideas.<sup>16</sup>

An important general message of this recent literature is that, when wage settlements are centralized within a small or moderate number of unions, CBI affects inflation **as well as** real variables like employment, output and real wages. The basic reason for this dramatic difference in outcomes is that, when setting nominal wages, labor unions act strategically by taking the policy response of the CB into consideration.<sup>17</sup> Since the expected response of the CB depends

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<sup>16</sup>A recent survey appears in Cukierman (2004a).

<sup>17</sup>In more technical terms they act as Stackelberg leaders vis a vis the CB.

on its independence, the actions of unions and the level of economic activity come to depend on CBI. This insight and the analytical frameworks that underly it are particularly relevant for European economies in which the fraction of the labor force covered by collective agreements is large and in which wage bargaining institutions are often rather centralized.

## 4.1 Main ideas and analytical frameworks

Most of the literature on the strategic interaction between the CB and unions shares two basic presumptions. First, nominal wages are contractually fixed for a certain period of time to which I refer as the 'contract period'. Second, monetary policy and prices can be adjusted during the contract period. Casual observation supports both presumptions. Union nominal wage are normally fixed for at least one year while prices and the money supply are usually adjusted at frequencies that are higher than one year. Those presumptions lead to the formulation of simple game theoretic models in which unions move first and set nominal wages while the CB moves second and chooses, depending on the model, the rate of inflation or the money supply. Third, union management likes higher real wages for its members but dislikes unemployment among them. Some of the recent literature also assumes that unions are averse to inflation. This is motivated by the observation that in many cases the pensions of union workers are not indexed and that union members, like other individuals, generally dislike inflation.

For the sake of simplicity a good part of the recent literature investigates the strategic interaction between the labor market and the CB for the extreme case of a single, all encompassing, monopoly union. The more recent literature generally considers the case of several unions. Following the lead of the KPBG type models much of the literature on unions and the CB assumes that the CB directly controls the rate of inflation. More recent literature recognizes that prices are set by firms and that the policy instrument of the monetary authority is the money supply.<sup>18</sup> A basic consequence of this difference in modeling choices is that in the first group of models monetary policy affects the economy only via supply side channels whereas in the second group it affects it mainly through demand side channels.

This difference in modeling strategy leads to diametrically opposed conclusions about

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<sup>18</sup>By using money equilibrium the analysis in those models can be recast, equivalently, in terms of an interest rate instrument instead of a money stock instrument

the real effects of CBI on the economy. In particular papers which assume that the CB directly controls inflation and that unions are averse to inflation, conclude that by alleviating the inflationary fears of unions more conservative central banks induce higher real wage demands and higher levels of unemployment (Skott (1997), Cukierman and Lippi (1999), Lawler (2000) and Lippi (2003)).<sup>19</sup> On the other hand work by Soskice and Iversen (1998, 2000) which abstracts from unions' inflation aversion and postulates that the monetary authority controls the money supply concludes that less accommodating central banks moderate unions' wage demands by raising the fear of unemployment among their members. This view implies that both inflation and unemployment are lower under less accommodative central banks.<sup>20</sup>

Coricelli, Cukierman and Dalmazzo (2005) propose a framework that integrates those different mechanisms into a unified framework making it possible to identify the conditions under which either of the effects above dominates. The framework features both supply side and demand side transmission channels of monetary policy. They find that, for realistic values of the relative aversion of unions to inflation and to unemployment, higher CBI reduces the bargaining power of unions and leads to lower values of unemployment, real wages and inflation. The main features of this framework are as follows. Prices and wages are set, respectively, by monopolistically competitive firms and by labor unions. Prices are fully flexible and wages are contractually fixed. The CB affects the price level and employment indirectly via its choice of money supply. The game now has a third stage in which firms set prices so as to maximize their real profits. This is preceded by the choice of money supply in the second stage and by the choice of nominal wages in the first stage.

## 4.2 Implications for the European Monetary Union (EMU)

The creation, at the beginning of 1999, of the EMU and of the European Central Bank (ECB) altered the strategic interaction between the monetary authority and labor unions in the Euro

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<sup>19</sup>In the extreme case of a monopoly union this view implies that, (abstracting from stabilization policy) a populist or ultra liberal CB that cares only about unemployment is best for a society that dislikes both inflation and unemployment

<sup>20</sup>Accommodation and conservativeness are distinct concepts. However, empirical evidence discussed in subsection 2.7 suggests that more conservative central banks are less accommodative. Such an association is also implied by theory.

area. Prior to the creation of the ECB labor unions in each country interacted only with their own national CB. In some countries like Germany the CB was setting monetary policy so as to attain its preferred level of domestic objectives. In some other countries like Austria and Belgium, the CB conducted monetary policy so as to maintain a fixed parity with the German Mark, importing the Bundesbank monetary policy. After the creation of EMU the strategic interaction between labor unions and the CB obviously changed. In particular, each labor union became a smaller player relatively to the CB of the monetary union.

For labor unions of countries whose CB's previously conducted an independent monetary policy, national monetary policy was replaced by that of the ECB. For labor unions of countries whose CB was previously pegging to the D-Mark the monetary policy of the ECB replaced the peg. In addition, for some of the countries involved, like Italy and France and Spain, the level of CBI went up quite substantially. Some of the conceptual frameworks mentioned above have been adapted to investigate the long run macroeconomic consequences of these changes. Various aspects of those major changes in monetary institutions are analysed in Gruner and Hefeker (1999), Sibert and Sutherland (2000) and Cukierman and Lippi (2001).<sup>21</sup> A broad survey of the issues and implications for the future appear in Calmfors (2001).

## 5 Future challenges for an era of price stability

In sharp contrast to the decade of the eighties large parts of the world currently enjoy price stability and central banks have become the guardians of this stability. This, I believe, is a good arrangement since reasonably independent central banks have a comparative advantage in maintaining price stability in comparison to bringing high rates of inflation down.<sup>22</sup>

There are several reasons to believe that this era of price stability is here to stay. First, even moderately independent CB's today find it easier than in the past to insist on delivering price stability because so much of each country's trade is with countries that are also charac-

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<sup>21</sup>The conduct of stabilization policy in a monetary union with imperfectly competitive labor and goods markets is analyzed in Coricelli, Cukierman and Dalmazzo (2004).

<sup>22</sup>Cukierman, Webb and Neyapti (2002) show that high levels of legal CBI in the newly created central banks of the former socialist economies did not stop the substantial inflationary impact of price decontrols during the nineties.

terized by price stability. This is reinforced by substantially higher freedom in the movement of capital and the associated wider international capital markets. In this new era, nominal/and or financial instability within a single country is much more costly than in the past in terms of limitations on the access to capital markets. Ministries of finance and governments anxious to maintain unhindered access to borrowing in case of need understand that letting inflation persistently deviate from the world norm will raise the risk premium on their borrowings and generally limit their ability to borrow. They, consequently, are more willing than in the past to allow central banks to focus on price stability. Similar considerations apply to the maintainance of financial stability. Thus, free and wide capital markets reinforce the incentives of governments to appoint relatively conservative central banker and to give them enough latitude to maintain a strong focus on the attainment of price stability.

## **5.1 Monetary policy in an era of price stability and flexible inflation targeting**

At the same time, once inflation has been conquered, there is a natural tendency to expect that, when choosing its policy instruments, the central bank will pay more attention to the state of the real economy than during the period of inflation stabilization. Using Svensson (1997) terminology, they expect the bank to become a flexible inflation targeter, or if the bank had already been flexible during stabilization, they expect it will become even more flexible once inflation had been conquered.<sup>23</sup> Such expectation arises first because politicians and the public generally expect policymaking institutions to deal with the current main problem. Once inflation has been eradicated from the system, they take this fact for granted and expect the bank will pay more attention to other pressing problems of the day.

But there is also, a deeper welfare based, reason to justify more flexibility (or less conservativeness) on the part of the CB. It is related to the fact, discussed in subsection 3.3, that the policy tradeoff between inflation and economic activity changes after the permanent sta-

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<sup>23</sup>A CB is a flexible inflation targeter if its loss function penalizes the output as well as the inflation gaps. By contrast a bank is a strict inflation targeter if it cares only about the inflation gap. Obviously there can be only one kind of strict targeter but many types of flexible targeters depending on the weight of the output gap in comparison to that of the inflation gap in the bank's loss function. The higher this weight, the more flexible, or less conservative, is the bank.

bilization of inflation. In particular, a unit change in the policy instrument, like the interest rate for example, has a relatively stronger and more sustained impact on economic activity in comparison to inflation than prior to the stabilization of inflation. It can be shown that, under such circumstances, a higher degree of flexibility in monetary policy is indicated. The intuition is that, since the policy trade off between economic activity and inflation is now "better" it pays, on welfare ground to let monetary policy focus, relatively more than during disinflation, on stabilization of the output gap.<sup>24</sup>

Obviously flexible inflation targeting requires an operational measure of the output gap. Since the output gap is defined as the deviation of actual output from potential output, implementation of flexible inflation targeting requires an operational measure of the output gap. Although central banks have been using various smooth versions of actual output to proxy for potential output for quite a while this procedure may at time cause serious policy mistakes. In addition it is not grounded in theory. The next subsections briefly reviews the origins of those problems.

## 5.2 The perils of output gap stabilization

Nobody knows with certainty what is the time path of potential output. Although part of this uncertainty is resolved with the benefit of hindsight there is normally substantial uncertainty about the current and near future expected level of this variable at the time monetary policy choices are made. A major implication of this observation for the choice of monetary policy procedures is that, due to poor real time knowledge about the output gap, flexible inflation targeters condition their policy on a variable that is measured with a substantial amount of error.

In an important paper Orphanides (2001) shows that during the second part of the seventies and part of the eighties the Fed systematically overestimated potential output leading to substantial overestimation of the magnitude of the recession at that times. Since the Fed behaved as a flexible inflation targeter those forecast errors induced a monetary policy stance which came to be considered, with the benefit of hindsight, as excessively loose thus contributing

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<sup>24</sup>This point is developed more fully in Cukierman (2004b).

to the inflationary bulge of the second half of the seventies in the US. The fact that there was a substantial decrease in output during the second half of the seventies is well known and is not under dispute. What is at issue here is how much of this decrease was due to cyclical elements over which monetary policy has some temporary impact versus how much was due to changes in potential output over which monetary policy has little or no impact.

Since errors of forecast are sometimes positive, at other times negative, and normally not persistent, one may think at first blush that policy errors induced by poor measurement of the output gap should not inject persistent errors into the choice of monetary policy. Unfortunately, this is not the case with the output gap. Cukierman and Lippi (2005) show that errors in forecasting potential output and the output gap are generally serially correlated. The intuitive reason is that, unlike forecasts of many variables whose true values become known with a lag of one period, the true values of potential output and of the output gap are not revealed with certainty, even after the fact. As a consequence monetary policy errors of flexible inflation targeters become serially correlated as well. In periods in which potential output does not deviate much from its trend the measured persistence in policy is small and may not constitute a serious problem for growth targeting. But in periods with large deviations of potential output from its trend policy errors may be quite persistent over time. Thus, in the presence of flexible inflation targeting, the inherent unobservability of the output gap is particularly dangerous for nominal stability around and following turning points in the path of potential output.

### **5.3 A new conception of the output gap**

An intriguing recent innovation of New Keynesian economics is to conceptualize potential output as the level of output that would have been produced in the economy under flexible wages and prices and perfect competition in all markets. Woodford (2003, ch. 6) shows that, provided those conditions are satisfied, economic welfare is maximized when output is equal to this concept of potential output.<sup>25</sup> On this basis he suggests that monetary policy should be directed at minimizing the gap between actual output and this New Keynesian potential output concept.

This notion of potential output has two attractive features. First, it is welfare based.

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<sup>25</sup>An early formulation of this principle appears in Goodfriend and King (1997) and Rotemberg and Woodford (1997).

Second it is particularly suited as a target for monetary policy since it directs attention to the distortion that monetary policy can handle relatively more efficiently (temporary distortions of relative prices). But its practical applicability is limited by the fact that there currently are no empirical measures of the flexible price and wage equilibrium.<sup>26</sup> In addition most real world markets are imperfectly competitive. Once this is recognized the level of output that maximizes welfare no longer necessarily equals the flexible wage and price equilibrium (Benigno and Woodford (2004), Cukierman (2005)). On top of that the flexible price/wage equilibrium is often more volatile than the sticky price/wage equilibrium implying that policymakers should aim at making the level of output more, rather than less, volatile. My reality judgement is that, even if reliable measures of the flexible price/wage equilibrium had been available, most central bankers would resist such a policy. Cukierman (2005) provides a partial rationalization for such resistance by showing that, in the presence of monopolistic competition on product markets the sticky price/wage equilibrium may welfare dominate its flexible counterpart.

## 5.4 Capital market inflationary expectations as a guide to monetary policy

Since prices are determined by the decentralized decisions of many sellers the rate of inflation is ultimately determined by the aggregation of their decisions. An important insight of New-Keynesian economics is that, due to temporary price and wage stickiness, the aggregate rate of inflation depends on inflationary expectations. The central bank can therefore affect the rate of inflation by influencing inflationary expectations. Importantly, this implies that a current credible change in CB policy may affect the rate of inflation immediately and not only with a lag, as is the case in backward looking models.<sup>27</sup>

Countries like Israel and Chile in which the joint availability of nominal and indexed bonds makes it possible to obtain up to date information on inflationary expectations can therefore use this information as a leading indicator of inflation and partially base monetary policy on it. The Bank of Israel has actually done that to various extents during the last

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<sup>26</sup>To a first approximation there is no connection between traditional measures of potential output based on various smoothers of output and the flexible wage and price equilibrium under perfect competition.

<sup>27</sup>A survey appears in Clarida, Gali and Gertler (1999).

decade with reasonable success. One advantage of inflationary expectations from the capital market as an indicator of monetary policy is that when, due to unanticipated adverse shocks credibility declines, the bank can act quickly to restore credibility before the decline has had a serious impact on inflation. During periods following the successful stabilization of inflation in which the uncertainty about structural economic parameters is high the availability of such an indicator is particularly attractive.

Bernanke and Woodford (1997) point out that, if conventionally defined rational inflationary expectations are used as the sole indicator for policy, the price level may become indeterminate and the rate of inflation may diverge. This is sometimes referred to figuratively as the problem of "the monkey in the mirror". However in spite of occasional substantial reliance on inflationary expectations from the capital market no such instability had been recorded in Israel. Possible reasons for this divergence between theory and outcomes is that the Bank of Israel has relied on other indicators as well and generally deviated from precise adherence to the mechanical rule postulated in Bernanke and Woodford. My gut feeling is that, although the problem of the monkey in the mirror may become a real possibility under high inflation, it is very unlikely in the current generally very low inflation environment.

## **5.5 Central bank accountability and transparency**

Since central banks are non elected institutions they should be held accountable to the democratically elected representatives of the public. There is widespread agreement about this principle but one hears about it more nowadays than in the past. The reason is simple. Twenty or more years ago most central banks had little instrument independence so accountability was automatically assured. As delegation of authority over the conduct of monetary policy became more pronounced explicit institutions for the assurance of accountability had to be devised. As a consequence, increased delegation of authority over monetary policy goes hand in hand with more explicit devices designed to make the CB accountable to the public. There are some interesting institutional design questions about whether the "disbursement" of this accountability should be done only through government or also through other impartial bodies but I will skip

those in the interest of brevity.<sup>28</sup>

Transparency is a related feature that has also been highly acclaimed. The consensus view is that it is desirable, not only because it enhances the accountability of the CB, but also because it affords better control of the public's expectations by the bank. This generally raises the efficacy of monetary policy and in many cases welfare as well.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, there is no consensus among central bankers and academics about the optimal degree of transparency and about the precise procedures for the implementation of transparency. This is vividly illustrated by an exchange between Willem Buiter (on the Bank of England MPC at the time) and Otmar Issing (on the Governing Council of the EMU) during the early days of the EMU.<sup>30</sup> Disagreements involve issues such as the advance publication of CB forecasts and publication of individual votes of monetary council members. The last issue is related to the question of whether accountability should be collective or individual.

Two open issues with respect to transparency are the following. One is how to assure transparency when monetary policy decisions are made by a council composed of individuals with different loss functions and expectations. Should the bank publish the loss functions and economic forecasts of each council member following (or perhaps prior to) each council meeting? Is such a strategy feasible and, if it is, will it necessarily increase the transparency of the bank's broad policy stance? The answers to those questions are by no means obvious. The reason is that the mapping between the level of transparency and particular institutional devices is not always clear cut.

The second question is normative. Assuming that the mapping between transparency and institutional devices is known with certainty, should the level of transparency be as high and as immediate as technically feasible? My answer to this question is "obviously not". An examples will suffice to illustrate the reason. Suppose that the CB, in its capacity as supervisor of the banking system becomes aware of problems of solvency in a major bank. Full transparency requires immediate dissemination of this information. But this is likely to precipitate a run on the banking system that, most likely, will make the resolution of this situation substantially

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<sup>28</sup>A fuller discussion appears in Cukierman (2001).

<sup>29</sup>A survey appears in Geraats (2002).

<sup>30</sup>Details appear in Buiter (1999), Issing (1999). A summary and evaluation of the controversy appears in Cukierman (2001).

more costly from a social point of view. In addition, advance publication of CB forecasts when the bank possesses an information advantage about the economy, is likely to reduce its ability to stabilize the real economy.<sup>31</sup>

## 5.6 Central bank capital, distribution of profits and independence

The issue of CB capital and of rules for the distribution of profits and their impact on the bank's independence is a relatively neglected institutional aspect of central banking. It appears, at first blush, to bear strong similarities to such questions for private corporations. Formally central banks and private firms are incorporated within a similar legal structure and utilize similar accounting principles. However this resemblance in formal procedures hides several important differences. Unlike private corporations, CB's are set up to achieve aggregate policy objective(s) rather than to maximize profits. Unlike a private corporation, a negative net worth (or capital) at the CB does not imply that the bank will go bankrupt and cease to operate. Finally, the main owner of the CB is the government rather than private individuals implying that any distribution of profits increases the spending power of government and that CB losses ultimately translate into revenue losses or additional expenditures for the central government.

When the level of CB capital becomes negative and drops below some threshold there is a danger that the political establishment might be successful in preventing the bank from following policies that lead to additional losses, limiting the independence of the bank through its balance sheet position. In such cases, the more capital a CB possesses, the better its ability to conduct policy independently from fiscal authorities. This consideration is particularly important when the public interest requires the CB to adopt policies that create further losses for the bank. Such situations may arise for a variety of reasons like when achievement of an inflation target necessitates contractionary policies, when financial stability considerations require the bank to assume the losses of failed financial institutions in order to reduce the risk of a systemic crisis or due to a costly defense of a peg or band.

The point is not that negative capital always limits the policy options of the bank. Thus, the Banco Central de Chile managed to stabilize inflation in spite of negative capital on its

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<sup>31</sup>Cukierman (2001) shows that, by reducing the bank's ability to stabilize the economy, the advance publication of CB forecasts reduces welfare as conventionally measured by quadratic losses in the output and inflation gaps.

balance sheet. In the Chilean case the negative capital was not a constraint because government was committed to maintain a budgetary surplus. But there obviously are other cases in which the negative capital of the bank seriously limited independence. Examples are provided in Stella (2002).

Does that imply that in order to assure CBI government should always cover all CB losses? The answer is not clear cut since such an arrangement allows a non elected institution (the CB) make fiscal policy decisions. This is obviously questionable on grounds of democratic accountability. Consequently, there is a tradeoff between democratic accountability and CBI. This tradeoff may become particularly important when the occurrence of large economic or political shocks force the CB to engage in policies that have substantial adverse fiscal implications. When endowed with sufficient legal independence and positive levels of capital, it is quite likely that, most Western CB's will be able to engage in loss creating policies when such policies are required. However, if at the time those policies are needed the bank already has a substantial amount of negative capital, it is likely that the political establishment will have the ability, and often the incentive, to stop, delay or severely limit them.

This risk is important mainly in developing countries in which the association between actual and legal independence is loose. In such cases the relation between independence and the level of CB capital is likely to be discontinuous in the sense that below a certain threshold of negative capital the CB will be seriously limited by political authorities even if it enjoys a high level of legal independence. But above this threshold the ability of the bank to conduct policy independently will not depend, to a first approximation, on the level of CB capital. It follows that maintenance of a sufficiently high level of capital is basically a (partial) insurance against states of nature in which the bank's ability to resist the pressures of political authorities is weakened.

Similar considerations apply to rules and regulations for the allocation of CB profits to government. Such rules are often not very transparent and biased towards larger distributions to government opening the door for evasion of deficit limits. Clear and transparent rules about the distribution of profits as well as about procedures for rebuilding negative levels of central bank capital enhance the bank's independence and its credibility as a guardian of price stability. An enlightening discussion of those issues appears in Stella (2002).

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