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The British Labour Party and the Civil Service in the Twentieth Century

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'Socialists . . . idealise the salaried public servant', explained Beatrice Webb in 1924 as the first Labour government (in which her husband, Sidney, was a minister) was taking office in Britain: 'they look to him [sic] to save the world' (Cole 1956, p.9). 'The gentleman in Whitehall knows best', insisted another socialist thinker and a future government minister, Douglas Jay (1937, p.317), in the 1930s. The dominance of a centralist and statist approach in the British Labour Party's political thinking and practice in the twentieth century gave a vital role to the civil service and the Whitehall bureaucratic machine in the transformation of society and the achievement of socialism. Alternative ideas about decentralisation, 'guild socialism' or 'municipal socialism' faded away as Labour became a major parliamentary party and the actual or alternative government in the 1920s and 1930s. The Labour Party became firmly assimilated into the traditional 'Westminster model' of the British state, with its emphasis on strong government, parliamentary sovereignty, ministerial responsibility and civil service neutrality.

However, outside a small Fabian Society circle of intellectuals and gradual reformists, and apart from spasmodic left-wing attacks, Labour has generally not paid much serious or sustained attention to the civil service and the Whitehall machine.

There was and is no single, coherent 'Labour Party view' about the nature and problems of the civil service or its reform. Different views and opinions can be found cutting across (and within) left and right-wing factions in the party, in periods of opposition compared to periods of government, between socialist intellectuals and Labour's professional politicians, between ministers and the party organisation or rank-and-file members. Opinion on the question of civil service power and (alleged) obstruction of socialist policies and ministers, for instance, seems in some respects to have reflected evaluations of the success or otherwise of Labour governments: many ministers always denied 'sabotage' claims and this was less of an issue in the party after the 1945-51 government than after (and during) the 1964-70 and 1974-79 terms of office.

'Civil service reform alone will not restore [sic] parliamentary democracy or Cabinet responsibility in Britain. It cannot by itself create the basis for a successful Socialist Government. It is, however, one of the most essential and fundamental *preconditions* of both.' This was the opinion of Thomas Balogh, a close adviser to Harold Wilson and a fierce critic of the Whitehall mandarins, writing in the late 1950s (Balogh 1959). However, in office, Labour prime ministers from Ramsay MacDonald (1924, 1929-31) to Clement Attlee (1945-51), Harold Wilson (1964-70, 1974-6) and James Callaghan (1976-9) have been institutionally conservative and have not pushed through thoroughgoing radical reform of the civil service. Unlike some of their followers, they appear to have been reasonably satisfied with the Whitehall status quo and to have given administrative reform a low priority. In fact, the Labour Party has never had a clear blueprint for reform of the Whitehall bureaucracy, though certain lines of criticism of civil service organisation, management, power and accountability

recur through the party's history, together with proposals for reform. In practice, however, Labour governments made only patchy progress toward the implementation of Whitehall reforms from the 1920s through to the 1970s (Theakston 1992).

The Fabian reform tradition

The reformist Fabian critique accepted the political neutrality of the state machine and the civil service but suggested that it was an inefficient instrument for a progressive government. This theme can be traced back to Sidney and Beatrice Webb, who - drawing on ideas developed as part of the wider cross-party pre-First World War campaign for 'national efficiency' - in their *Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain* urged the need for what they called 'a civil service of a new kind' - more expert, specialised and trained in modern administrative techniques and the social sciences (Webb 1920, pp.175-6). A direct line can subsequently be traced in this vein from the writings of socialist theorists like Harold Laski and G.D.H. Cole, through various Fabian Society reports, to the Fabian high tide in the 1960s, marked by Harold Wilson's modernising drive and the Whitehall reforms he instigated by setting up the Fulton Committee on the reform of the civil service (1966-68).

It is a fair criticism of the Fabians that their concern was largely with civil service inefficiency rather than with the democratisation of a socially unrepresentative higher bureaucracy, perhaps reflecting the shared educational and class backgrounds and culture of Labour's intellectual elite and the leading mandarins (Hetzner 1985). The envious eyes cast in the 1960s at the confident planners and technocrats formed

by the French *École Nationale d'Administration* (*ENA*) suggested a move towards a more meritocratic elite and not an egalitarian remodelling of the civil service. The Fabian reformers also anticipated greater interchange between the civil service and private industry and business, though, of course, many on the Labour left have always been suspicious of what they see as the already close and sympathetic relations between the bureaucracy and business interests. A fundamental weakness in the Fabian-Fulton approach was the exaggerated emphasis on managerial efficiency and the neglect of the constraints imposed by the political and parliamentary environment on the organisation and working of the civil service. The reluctance of Labour governments to reconsider the constitutional conventions governing the relations of ministers, civil servants and parliament has been a key factor limiting the extent to which Whitehall could be remodelled according to this managerialist model.

Let Us Face the Future, the Labour Party's 1945 election manifesto, had promised 'the better organisation of Government departments and the Civil Service', but made no specific commitments. There had in fact been no proper attempt to work out a detailed reorganisation blueprint for Whitehall as part of the preparations in the 1930s and early 1940s for a future Labour government. The party leadership's experience in the wartime Churchill coalition (1940-45) served mostly to reinforce ministers cautious and pragmatic 'insiders' attitude. As Peter Hennessy has put it: 'Attlee and his ministers, despite being a radically intentioned government, did not embark on a reform of the Civil Service because they knew the war-time machine personally and liked what they saw. They had seen the recent administrative past and it had worked' (Hennessy 1986, p.37).

In the 1930s Clement Attlee had mused over schemes for the reorganisation of the Cabinet system and the government machine from first principles, also criticising the absence of a 'general staff' or a central planning staff in Whitehall. He was clear, however, that the system of government and administration in Britain had in the past adapted to new conditions and while it needed some specific improvements and reforms, it could be used to 'bring about the fundamental changes which we desire' (Attlee 1937, p.136). During the war, as deputy prime minister, he urged the removal of Sir Horace Wilson, the permanent secretary of the Treasury and head of the civil service, partly because of the mistrust Wilson stirred in Labour circle as a key *eminence grise* figure in the Chamberlain regime and partly because of the cramping effect of the Treasury running the civil service. 'The impetus of vigorous government decisions comes up against a certain resistance, not wilful but instinctive and habitual in the ranks of Higher Civil Servants', he told Winston Churchill (who himself thought there was 'much to be said' for that view).[1] Attlee also put some moderately reformist (and pretty standard-issue Fabian-type) proposals to the wartime Cabinet's machinery of government committee, backing a civil service staff college, greater interchange with other public organisations and outside business, and splitting the Treasury to put 'establishments' (personnel and management functions) directly under the prime minister.[2] Later, senior officials could not hide their relief when, in November 1945, after he had become prime minister, he conceded that these ideas needed 'reconsideration in the light of experience'.

[1] Churchill Archive Centre: CHAR 20/20/28-31.
[2] Note by the Deputy Prime Minister, MG (42) 6, 31 December 1942, National Archives: CAB 87/74.

Calls for an overhaul of the civil service came after 1945 from left-wing *Tribune* circles ('new tasks are calling for new men and new methods', wrote one critic; the existing bureaucracy 'was supposed to serve the political system we are just about to consign to perdition') and from some of the able and ambitious new Labour MPs who had served as wartime 'temporaries', notably Hugh Gaitskell and Evan Durbin, reformist social democrats wanting a more dynamic and economically-expert officialdom. But after 1945 there was nothing like an administrative revolution in Whitehall and the civil service largely settled back into its old pattern. The Whitehall top brass instead supervised an in-house exercise involving limited, piecemeal and pragmatic adjustments to the civil service and machinery of government, not a fundamental remodelling - a great 'missed opportunity', according to historian Peter Hennessy. The key to this, though, was 'not timidity . . . but self-confidence', as he acknowledges. Top Labour ministers, including Attlee, now felt the system worked well enough and that large-scale reorganisation would be an unnecessary distraction. They had experienced none of the bureaucratic resistance or sabotage that Laski and others had predicted and that might have spurred a major programme of reform (see: Theakston 1992, ch.3).

Two decades later, the Fulton Committee on the civil service (1966-68) was the product of Harold Wilson's brief 'white heat' phase of technological modernisation and reform. Into it flowed longstanding left wing and Fabian ideas about civil service reform (dating back to the 1930s), the questioning and critical 1960s' attitude towards supposedly out-of-date and inefficient institutions that were held to be obstacles to economic and social modernisation, and fashionable contemporary ideas about planning, expertise, business methods and management efficiency (see: Theakston

1992, ch.4). In Opposition in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Labour Party opinion about the need for civil service reform had been shaped by Thomas Balogh's blistering attacks on both the Treasury and on civil service amateurism (Balogh 1959), and by the publication in 1964 of an influential Fabian group report, *The Administrators*, which called for a more professional, specialized, dynamic and expert civil service. Wilson's political need to project his image as a reformer also dovetailed with an important reform impulse inside Whitehall itself (compared to the 1940s there was a recognition in some parts of the leadership of the civil service that changes were now needed). Based as it was upon collectivist assumptions about 'big government', and emphasising the need for management expertise in an era of rising public expenditure, the expansion of government activities, and large departments, the Fulton report sounded more radical than it really was. There was, however, little sustained top-level political interest in its implementation after 1968, and in practice the report largely served to assist, encourage and accelerate developments already underway or in the pipeline in the civil service (in terms of organisation, personnel management, recruitment and training) rather than amounting to the sort of 'big-bang' administrative revolution that the most strident of Whitehall's outside critics looked for (often then going on to complain about the bureaucracy 'defeating' the reform cause).

The fact was that Harold Wilson was always very much at home in Whitehall. He had a close and intimate knowledge of the government machine and its leading personalities, going back to his successful stint as a high-flying wartime 'temporary' civil servant. As prime minister in the 1960s, a contemporary observer described him as displaying 'a profound reverence for the orders and mysteries of the civil service . . . He

would be most upset if he ever thought he had caused serious offence to a permanent secretary.' He was proud of being 'house trained', in the Whitehall phrase, and generally worked well with civil servants, holding them in high regard. For Marcia Williams, Wilson's Personal and Political Secretary in Number 10, this was a problem: 'It is the fact that he does have such an admiration for and such a working knowledge of "the System" that he tends to lean over backwards in his relationship towards it. He gives it the benefit of the doubt. He doesn't really want to argue with it. He admires the way it is organised and its methods of working. He admires its efficiency and he is often myopic about its failings and its shortcomings and its inefficiencies, and this is a great drawback' (Theakston 2006, p.148).

Wilson was ever aware of the presentational advantages of reorganization and redesign in government institutions, and endlessly tinkered with the machinery of government – creating new government departments in Whitehall and merging or renaming old ones (Blick 2006). But his approach was ad hoc and very political (concerned with short-term headlines and with reshuffling, balancing or playing-off against each other the personalities round the Cabinet table and his political rivals), showing little evidence of strategic purpose or design. Wilson is said by Hennessy to have had 'a career-long animus against the Treasury' (Hennessy 1989, p.180), and his personal economic adviser Thomas Balogh absolutely hated that department and what it stood for. The Department of Economic Affairs (DEA) was created in 1964 with the hope that it would be a champion of industrial modernization, economic growth and planning, and a rival to the Treasury. But this attempt at introducing 'creative tension' into Whitehall failed to break the Treasury's predominance over economic policy. The

division of functions between the two departments was ill thought out, ministerial leadership of the DEA was volatile and unstable, and – crucially - the Labour government's decision to give priority to the defence of the exchange rate and the balance of payments ensured that the Treasury would inevitably emerge victorious in the inter-departmental struggles.

Labour's experience in office

The first, short-lived minority Labour governments (1924 and 1929-31) did little to disturb the organisation, methods of working or personnel of the civil service. Left-wing critics argued at the time that class prejudice meant that senior officials would necessarily block a socialist policy. But it is clear that some Labour ministers were simply not equipped or experienced enough to use properly the bureaucratic machine, were carried by their officials, and/or lacked the clear policy ideas to challenge Whitehall's established 'departmental views'. The Treasury became a particular hate-object among socialist critics of Whitehall after 1931, following the second Labour government's inadequacies and collapse in the face of mass unemployment and financial crisis. Reactionary officials there had obstructed and hindered ministers, argued George Lansbury. But the real problem was that Labour's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Snowden, was a stereotypical 'strong' minister who was not under the thumb of his civil servants but held tenaciously onto financial and economic orthodoxies, and his policy views were widely held and dominant inside the Labour Party and the government at that time.

Discounting the experience of the MacDonald governments, Harold Laski argued in the 1930s that the neutrality of the civil service had not yet been tested by the need to work in support of a Labour government with a full-blown socialist programme. Liberal and Conservative governments before 1924 had differed in degree, not kind. A socialist government would challenge the economic foundations of society and the traditional ideas for which the civil service had stood. Labour could not be sure that the mandarins would serve it with their customary disinterested zeal (Laski 1938, p.317). Because of the top officials' class backgrounds and elite public school and Oxbridge education, 'the predominant temper and outlook of the administrative class represent too narrow an area of public opinion… The major assumptions of the important officials are roughly those of the ruling class' (Laski 1942, p.7). However, later revisiting the subject in his lectures *Reflections on the Constitution* in 1950, Laski was curiously silent on this point, perhaps because he recognized that the Attlee government had no reason to complain about civil service resistance or sabotage.

When Attlee succeeded Winston Churchill as British Prime Minister in 1945, and returned to the Potsdam peace conference, the same team of civil servants accompanied him that had made up his predecessor's delegation. This continuity surprised the Americans and the Russians, but the officials concerned made the transition without apparent difficulty and the Labour leader had no doubts about the impartiality or loyalty of his staff. Out of office in the 1950s, Attlee would boast to international socialist conferences that the British career civil service was unequalled in the world, one of the strongest bulwarks of democracy, and applauded the fact that the same officials who had worked out the details of Labour's programme were now busy pulling

it to pieces for their Conservative masters (Attlee 1954). Other leading members of the 1945-51 Labour Government also praised the Whitehall machine — Herbert Morrison, for instance, later penning an uncritical account of the working of the British system of government that ended with a 'Tribute to the British Civil Service' (Morrison 1964).

'On balance', says Kenneth Morgan in his history of the Attlee government, 'evidence of civil service obstruction of the activities and policies of the Labour government is very hard to uncover' (Morgan 1985, p.85). Hugh Dalton called civil servants 'congenital snag-hunters' in his memoirs, but it would be nonsense to claim that officials undermined the policies of Dalton and then Stafford Cripps at the Treasury or thwarted the reforms of the left-wing Aneurin Bevan at the Ministry of Health. Ernest Bevin was certainly not the Foreign Office's poodle, and the powerful working class titan robustly rejected attacks at the 1946 and 1947 party conferences on the unrepresentative, upper-class character of the diplomatic service. Labour's ministerial team in 1945 had the twin advantages of a five-year apprenticeship in government in the Churchill coalition and a bureaucracy ready to build upon wartime developments in economic planning and social reconstruction. On the other hand, Labour's plans in key areas - economic planning, nationalisation and the welfare state - were fairly vague. Without adequate blueprints, ministers inevitably had to rely upon civil servants to work out detailed schemes, which predictably reflected Whitehall's traditional methods of operation (Barker 1986).

The disappointing record of the 1964-70 Government, according to Marcia Williams, Wilson's Number 10 aide, could be attributed largely to Labour's 'defeats' in the 'battle… against the civil service.' Like Laski, she believed that 'a glance at the

service, and particularly recruitment at higher levels, makes it quite impossible to accept the neutrality argument.' Politically inclined more to the right than to the left, the civil service, she wrote, is 'undemocratic, particularly at the top; exclusive; and with a strange personality of its own, half reminiscent of the Army, half of a masonic society. Certainly many members of the Administrative Class seem unrelated to the outside world.' Her boss disagreed. 'The idea of some people that a change of government means sabotage from the civil service is, I think, nonsense', Wilson had declared before he became prime minister. From his experience in Whitehall during the 1940s, he was convinced that however great officials' influence might be, the power to get things done rested with ministers. He subscribed to the robust 'Attlee view', arguing that 'if a minister cannot control his civil servants, he ought to go', and insisting, in a 1967 interview, that: 'civil servants do what is required once they get a clear lead' (Theakston 2006, pp.148-150).

Critical comments on Whitehall personalities, civil service obstruction and the negative power of the Treasury litter the diaries written by ministers serving in the Wilson and Callaghan Governments, such as Richard Crossman, Tony Benn and Barbara Castle. They reflected and reinforced the view of the Labour left that, without major reform of Whitehall, the mandarins could not be relied upon to assist Labour's socialist project but would systematically sabotage it. Giving evidence to the Fulton Committee in 1967, Crossman described the higher civil service as 'a coherent and cohesive oligarchy' and as an organised 'conspiracy' against ministers.[3] His verdict was that the Attlee government had 'quietly expired in the arms of the Whitehall Establishment' and that ministers should automatically mistrust their civil servants. In a similar vein, Joe

[3] National Archives: BA 1/6.

Haines, Harold Wilson's Press Secretary 1974-76, recalled a constant struggle 'against being suffocated by the civil service', Whitehall's 'contempt' for the Government's manifesto and its 'instinct for coalition', and accused the Treasury of attempting 'to make the Government put its policies totally in reverse, abandon its manifesto commitments and commit suicide' by trying to 'bounce' it into introducing a compulsory pay policy in 1975. Had they succeeded, 'it would have been a civilian coup against the Government' (Haines 1977, pp. 16-39, 57-8).

As Tony Benn saw it, civil service power had grown to such an extent that it threatened the working of British parliamentary democracy. Outlining the 'process of civil service containment successfully practised against both Conservative and Labour governments' in the post-war period, Benn argued that 'it would be a mistake to suppose - as some socialists have suggested - that the senior ranks of the civil service are active Conservatives posing as impartial administrators . . . The problem arises from the fact that the civil service sees itself as being above the party battle, with a political position of its own to defend against all-corners, including incoming governments armed with their philosophy and programme' (Benn 1981, pp.44-67).

To the extent that criticisms such as these rest on an association between civil servants' social class backgrounds and public school/Oxbridge education and political views supposedly hostile to Labour, they can be dismissed as bad sociology. Whitehall's political views or policy stances are not monolithic. Contrary to Laski's view, one senior and well-informed civil service insider, H.E. Dale, writing in 1941, judged that 'the general temper of mind and character' of interwar Whitehall was 'Left Centre'. His estimate was that 'in their political principles, not always expressed by their votes,

about one-fourth of the Higher Civil Service are Conservative, one-half or slightly more are Liberal, and the remainder Labour of one shade or another.' Mandarins with progressive views have worked closely with Labour (and Conservative) ministers: in the Attlee period, Robert Hall and 'Otto' Clark at the Treasury and Andrew Cohen (who hoped to find a Labour seat in the 1950s) at the Colonial Office stand out; Sir William Nield, a senior official in the DEA and the Cabinet Office in the 1960s, had worked in Labour's Research and Policy Department in the late 1930s; and Sir Leo Pliatzky, a key figure at the Treasury in the 1970s, never made any secret of his active Fabian background. A survey conducted (in what was admittedly one of Labour's best years, 1966) for the Fulton Committee, found that among the small group of junior administrators (in the Principal grade) who had joined the civil service in 1956, Labour voters outnumbered Conservatives by almost three to one. And despite Labour's traditional suspicions of the Foreign Office, one former career diplomat wrote in 1981 (just before the SDP breakaway) that 'it was common knowledge that two-thirds of the Foreign Office and Service voted Labour nowadays.' Although impressionistic, such insider evidence does not square with the crude demonology found in some Labour circles (Theakston 1992, p.146).

The 'failures' of the Wilson period were political in origin rather than due to bureaucratic subversion. In his Godkin Lectures in 1970, Richard Crossman asked himself the question:

> If the Labour Government (of 1964-70) has made mistakes and suffered failures, would I attribute these failures and mistakes to the Civil Service?

> My answer is 'no' . . . I would say that normally when a Government fails it is not because the Civil Service blocks its plans, but because the Government team has not had a clear enough sense of direction. A Government which really knows where it is going, a Government which has a series of measures ready, prepared, well thought out, has to hand . . . an instrument which will enable it to carry out all it wants' (Crossman 1972, p.77).

Earlier, Laski too had seen that unless a government had come in knowing what it wanted to do in some detail, it had to 'trust to the ingenuity of the civil service to improvise a policy after office has been taken.' It was hardly surprising that departments should, in those circumstances, be able to impose their own orthodoxies upon unprepared ministers. A party's programme had to be more than slogans or wishful thinking. 'This predicates, of course, for the modern political party something like a civil service of its own. It must have at its disposal not merely men who can write well-sounding propaganda leaflets' (Laski 1938, pp.294-99). However, Labour's policy preparations in opposition, before 1964, were characteristically flimsy. The party had no detailed plans worked out to deal with the sterling crises it encountered immediately on taking office. Almost as soon as he entered the Cabinet in 1964, Crossman was complaining that 'what we lacked was any comprehensive, thoroughly thought-out Government strategy. The policies are being thrown together' (Crossman 1975, p.39).

This weakness was compounded by the fact that the 1964 ministerial team was largely ignorant of the techniques of governing after Labour's thirteen years out of office. Further, Wilson's regular reshuffles meant that too many ministers were switched between departments just as they were beginning to become effective in their posts. None of this can be blamed on the civil service: Labour's mistakes were its own. The experience of Tony Benn at the Department of Industry (1974-5) suggests that when a Labour Prime Minister and Cabinet *are* clear about what they want, they do not find the civil service blocking their way, though, as in that case, a departmental minister out of step with his political colleagues may well choose to complain of civil service obstruction.

'The loneliness of the short distance runner', is how Barbara Castle famously described the feeling of ministerial isolation in the face of 'mandarin power': it was 'one person against the vast department' (Castle 1973). Many socialist critics of Whitehall have, over the years, raised the problem of bureaucratic power in relation to ministers, making the argument that to supplement the information and advice coming from the civil service machine and to develop a stronger political control over policy-making, Labour ministers need political allies in their departments (Theakston 1992, pp.45-61). Following the recommendations of a Fabian group in 1964, the Labour Party's evidence to the Fulton Committee called for two types of political appointments: politically-committed experts in particular subjects and a ministerial *cabinet* - a small number of personal assistants to act as the minister's eyes and ears, to advise on policy and to liaise with the party. This theme can in fact be traced back to 1925 when, suspicious of the Foreign Office's role in the 'Zinoviev Letter' incident, the party's International

Advisory Committee proposed that a Labour government should be prepared to exercise a firmer political influence over diplomatic appointments and that the Foreign Secretary should have a 'political' Private Secretary who should be a Labour Party member. Noting Arthur Henderson's appointment of Philip Noel-Baker as a prototype special adviser at the Foreign office in 1929, Laski, in the 1930s, appears to have been the first to suggest the introduction of something akin to the French ministerial *cabinet* (Laski 1938, pp.302-4).

Although Dalton appointed Hugh Gaitskell his *Chef de Cabinet* during the wartime government, and Attlee used Douglas Jay as his personal economic adviser in Number 10 for a year after 1945, this idea was, however, slow to get off the ground. In the 1964-70 government, a number of ministers and the prime minister brought in personal aides and advisers, often economists, but on a fairly small scale. Their record was mixed and some – notably Thomas Balogh – clashed with 'the system' (Morris 2007). Only later in the 1974-79 Labour government did the total number of special advisers (including the No. 10 Policy Unit – an important Harold Wilson innovation in 1974) reach more than twenty (eventually reaching a much bigger number still under Tony Blair after 1997). This innovation must be put in perspective, however: special advisers in the 1960s and 1970s were too few in number to supplant the mass of career bureaucrats and they had no place in the administrative chain of command implementing decisions. And it is important to note that apart from Lansbury, leading Labour figures - such as MacDonald, Attlee, Morrison, Wilson and even Benn - always rejected the introduction of anything like a 'spoils system' or bringing in on a large scale outsiders to the civil service appointed on political grounds or with a party 'label'.

During Labour governments (as in Conservative governments before 1979), ministers were largely excluded from civil service appointment and promotion decisions, although discreet consultations generally ensured that personal incompatibilities were taken into account. But when Barbara Castle tried to remove her permanent secretary at the Ministry of Transport in 1966 she failed.

Labour's stance on bureaucratic accountability and secrecy

A third theme concerning Labour's relations with the civil service in this period relates to the bureaucracy's and the government's wider democratic accountability. For some in the party it was not a problem: 'if Labour Ministers are going to do better than Tory Ministers, why not give them a chance?' was one front-bencher's view in the 1960s, concerned that even raising the issue of strengthening government accountability could undermine citizens' confidence in public administration and rebound against the party.[4] Labour governments have always accepted the constitutional conventions of individual ministerial responsibility and collective Cabinet responsibility, and this has produced rather conservative views on issues such as civil service anonymity, Whitehall secrecy and the mechanisms of parliamentary scrutiny and accountability. Although some in the party, in the anti-bureaucratic, radical-liberal tradition, have been suspicious of executive power (Gwyn 1971), there has also been the contrary (and predominant) tradition of support for a strong government, dominating parliament and pushing

[4] Labour Party Archives: RD774/May 1964.

through the party's electorally legitimated programme. The conventions of the executive-dominated Westminster system were on this view not only no hindrance, but were actually essential to the furthering of the socialist cause.

Over the years, though, many in the party have advocated measures designed to subject the civil service machine to greater democratic oversight and accountability, albeit with only limited success and making slow progress in terms of practical change. Often unfairly criticised as illiberal 'administrative socialists', the Webbs believed that the existing methods of parliamentary supervision of the administration were inadequate, and proposed a complex structure of social and political parliaments, decentralisation, 'control departments' and parliamentary committees. They also attacked the 'disease' of official secrecy and described the 'searchlight' of publicity as essential for securing democratic control over government (Webb 1920). Before the First World War, Ramsay MacDonald had questioned the bureaucracy's 'methods of secrecy' and he and other Labour MPs had voted against the draconian and restrictive 1911 Official Secrets Act. In the 1920s Laski wanted to establish powerful House of Commons committees to inquire into departmental policy-making. But when Labour ministers got their feet under ministerial desks, parliamentary reform was not a priority and Whitehall's barriers of secrecy also survived the MacDonald governments intact. Later, in the 1930s, Fabian theorists such as W.A. Robson and Ivor Jennings proposed strengthened judicial controls and the creation of an administrative court (see: Theakston 1992, ch.6).

This sort of agenda did not, however, appeal to the Attlee government. It set up backbench PLP committees, though did not envisage them as a means of giving Labour

MPs an active part in policy-making but rather as a way of diverting and occupying potentially troublesome critics and gadflies. The traditions of 'closed' government were accepted without question. 'No Government can be successful which cannot keep its secrets', Attlee minuted his ministerial colleagues in 1945 (National Archives: CAB 129/4).

Out of office in the 1950s and early 1960s liberal ideas resurfaced as some thinkers tried to respond to the concerns about bureaucracy, controls and 'red tape' that had proved so potent in Conservative attacks on the Attlee government, and to broaden the party's electoral appeal in a changing society. In his controversial 1956 Fabian pamphlet *Socialism and the New Despotism*, Richard Crossman identified the control of the concentration of power in a vast, centralised state bureaucracy as one of the main, and neglected, tasks of socialism. Bureaucracy was a vehicle of social democracy but also a grave potential threat to it. Socialist extensions of state power should be matched and counter-balanced by new socialist defences for individual freedom.

The Labour government after 1964 can claim credit for innovations like the creation of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration or ombudsman (an idea borrowed from Scandinavia) but that was only a modest step in terms of bolstering citizen rights and protections against bureaucratic excess. Attempts at parliamentary reform in the 1960s – including experiments initiated by Crossman with specialist select committees to scrutinise government departments – were pretty half-hearted and made little headway. When one minister argued that 'our backbenchers should be grateful that as a socialist government we want to keep the Executive strong, not to

strengthen parliamentary control', he was actually applauded by others around the Cabinet table. The Wilson government reduced from 50 years to 30 years the time limit placed on the opening of government records – in the face of opposition within the Cabinet and in Whitehall – but that was hardly a massive move in the direction of greater access to information. Arguments for greater openness in government came onto the agenda in the 1960s, often couched in Fabian terms about improving policy-making by allowing better-informed public discussion and outside research and analysis, and the Fulton Committee called for a review of the Official Secrets Act. But in an adversarial political system, Labour ministers believed that there was no such thing as a politically neutral piece of official information. As James Callaghan put it, their attitude was: 'We are not going to tell you anything more than we can about what is going to discredit us.'

The party's October 1974 election manifesto included a pledge to replace the Official Secrets Act but the Callaghan government's stonewalling and abject failure to implement freedom of information reform served only to fuel demands for change from critics on the left of the party and outside campaigners for open government. It was left to later governments (of both main parties) to make more significant changes on this front: a proper system of parliamentary select committees appearing only after 1979 when Mrs Thatcher came to power, and with moves to open government and freedom of information reform finally coming under John Major and Tony Blair. To later campaigners and reformers on these issues, the Attlee, Wilson and Callaghan Labour governments were very much part of the Westminster and Whitehall *ancien regime*.

Labour and the civil service after 1979

While Labour governments from MacDonald through to Callaghan had, on the whole, done little to disturb the established order in Whitehall, it was actually the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major in the 1980s and 1990s that set about making some of the most far-reaching changes in the twentieth century to the way in which the civil service machine was organised and operated.

In the 1980s, in particular, Labour's interest in questions about the civil service and its reform was at a low ebb (Lipsey, 1982). The mind-concentrating prospect of office was remote, and the issues were not a priority for Michael Foot (1980-83) and then Neil Kinnock (1983-92) (Stone, 1996, pp.119-20). Looking back, Kinnock thought that the SDP split and the lurch to the left may have damaged the relationships and mutual understanding between Labour and the mandarinate that had been built up in an earlier period of Fabian/social democratic politics (Stone, 1996, p.151). Nevertheless, the Fabian Society organised seminars and meetings in the run-up to the 1992 and 1997 general elections to try to promote greater understanding between Labour front-bench figures and senior civil servants, aiming to educate the party about the issues it would face in relation to the machinery of government and Whitehall (Fabian Society, 1991; Hennessy, Hughes and Seaton, 1997).

Some Labour politicians expressed concerns about the 'politicisation' of the higher civil service under Thatcher, Major and the Conservatives. There was a lack of credible evidence to support the cruder allegations about a so-called 'is he one of us?' partisan promotions policy, however. Kinnock insisted that, given loyalty and

enthusiasm for a Labour government's policies, he was prepared to work on 'the conventional basis' with top mandarins while John Smith (party leader 1992-94) was worried that 'a Conservative mind-set' had developed among officials but felt that this could be reversed (Hennessy and Coates, 1992). The real point, however, was that the government machine was more effectively subject to ministerial control and direction than was the case in the Wilson-Heath-Callaghan years. Mrs Thatcher reasserted the power of the politicians, and Tony Blair later did not put that particular clock back.

In Opposition after 1979 Labour solidified its commitment to freedom of information reform and was happy to go along with calls for a Whitehall code of ethics, seeing both as useful sticks with which to beat the Conservative government and as fitting into the party's developing programme for wider constitutional reform.

The Conservatives' managerial revolution, gathering momentum through the 1980s and 1990s, produced massive, irreversible, changes in Whitehall, as in other parts of the public sector. Labour responded pragmatically to the 'new public management' reforms (Theakston, 1998). Next Steps executive agencies could be seen as a natural progression from the Labour-appointed Fulton report of 1968. Herbert Morrison had invented the term 'the Citizen's Charter' back in the 1920s, and Labour councils in the 1980s had pioneered the idea of charters aimed at improving the quality of local services. 'It is not in the interests of the British left to be uninterested in efficiency', argued the prominent Fabian MP Giles Radice, 'socialism and efficiency are not mutually exclusive.'

Acceptance of 'charterism' and its themes of quality, responsiveness, individual empowerment and the shift from a 'producer' to a 'consumer' emphasis, was bound up

with the wider transformation and modernisation of the party in the 1990s. Traditionally, Labour had placed the emphasis on the desirable end - providing state services - ignoring the fact that public services often turned out to be inflexible, unresponsive and customer-unfriendly. The new thinking signalled the end of the old top-down Fabian paternalism. It also meant a party identified with public sector employees coming to acknowledge that a public bureaucracy could be a vested interest just like any other. Labour knew in the 1990s that it could not afford to halt the management revolution, given the need to squeeze as much as possible from every public-sector pound spent – the efficiency drive would have to continue when it was next in government.

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