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Power with Purpose? Further Reflections on Strengthening the Centre of Government

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Abstract

On 10 March 2024 the Commission on the Centre of Government published its final report: *Power with Purpose*. The aim of the commission had been to explore why Number Ten, the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury do not always work as well as they should and to explore what could be done to improve the centre of government radically. Perennial concerns about the existence of a ‘hollow crown’ at the centre of British government were, the final report recommended, to be resolved through the implementation of a ‘radical’ reform agenda. This article interrogates the commission’s proposals from a critical perspective and builds upon existing concerns as to the viability of further centralising power in Whitehall. It achieves this by reflecting on an understanding of why history, criticality, governance, evidence and relationships matter when seeking to cope with complexity or when designing genuinely ‘radical’ new governance capabilities. It is argued that a full appreciation of these factors is essential to any project to strengthen the core executive and offers a more balanced, relational and systemic approach to nurturing strategic capacity in government.

Keywords: Whitehall, preparing for government, Civil Service, strategic capacity, Treasury, Cabinet Office, prime minister, governance, leadership

THE COMMISSION ON THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT [hereafter CCG] has concluded that No.10 Downing Street, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury are not capable of meeting the challenges facing the United Kingdom in the 2020s and beyond. The centre of government must become more strategic, better able to set direction and hold the rest of government accountable for delivery ... The reforms we set out here would give whoever forms the next government a better chance of success, creating strengthened, united political leadership at the heart of government, and a new way of ensuring Whitehall’s time and money is directed to long-term, cross-cutting priorities.¹

Patrick Dunleavy has already used the pages of this journal to offer a robust critique of what he describes as the commission’s

‘naïve plan’ for restructuring UK government at the centre.² Dunleavy interprets the report in terms of a ‘rather hackneyed rationalist case for more planned government at the centre’ and reflects upon five main issues: why the creation of a four person ‘executive cabinet’ would not work, why announcing an immediate set of ‘priorities for government’ would not work, why the issue of a new Civil Service statute was a ‘third term issue’ (which might not work), why the ‘weak and hapless’ plans for a ‘department for the civil service’ won’t work, but why removing the Treasury’s control of public spending and creating a new ‘department for finance, procurement and productivity’ might work, and the need for think tanks

¹Institute for Government, *Power with Purpose Final Report of the Commission on the Centre of Government*, IfG, 2024, p. 7; <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-03/Centre-Commission-final-report.pdf>

²P. Dunleavy, ‘Restructuring UK government at the centre—why the IfG’s commission’s naïve plan will not work’, *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 95, no. 2, 2024, online advance view; <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1467-923X.13398>

(‘or junk tanks’) to embrace critical views and engage with the scientific evidence base.

This article shares some of Dunleavy’s scepticism about the CCG’s recommendations, but offers a more constructive engagement with the plans put forward. As such, five nuanced and evidence-based reflections are offered which broaden the discussion from a myopic institutional and procedural focus on Whitehall to a richer emphasis on people, skills and leadership. These reflections can be summarised as follows: we need to learn from the history of previous ill-fated UK government reforms. To do so, we need to challenge common wisdom about the alleged benefits of greater centralisation and take the existence of multilevel governance more seriously. Otherwise, central governments will keep seeking simple solutions to complex policy-making problems. Taking inspiration from the emerging field of ‘positive public administration’, the benefits of seeking lessons from more sophisticated and successful reform projects are identified.³ Taken together, these reflections combine to offer three key insights. First, they pinpoint key ingredients for genuinely systemic thinking that can offer the ‘radically new governance capabilities’ Dunleavy’s essay calls for. Second, they range beyond traditional British ‘core executive studies’ to identify seams of relevant research, knowledge and insight to push and probe the CCG’s recommendations. Third, significant reforms that are intended to strengthen the centre of British government and increase central strategic capacity are likely to be implemented after the next general election. It appears to have been accepted as a ‘self-evident truth’ by a succession of independent reviews and parliamentary inquiries that the centre of the British system is too weak.⁴

³S. Douglas, et al., ‘Rising to Ostrom’s challenge: an invitation to walk on the bright side of public governance and public service’, *Policy Design and Practice*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2021, pp. 441–451.

⁴UK Parliament, *Strategic Leadership in the Civil Service*, Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee, nineteenth report, session 2017–2019, HC1536; F. Maude, *Independent Review of Governance and Accountability of the Civil Service*, UK Government, 2023; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-governance-and-accountability/independent-review-of-governance-and-accountability-in-the-civil-service-the-rt-hon-lord-maude-of-horsham-html>; UK Parliament, ‘Scrutiny of strategic thinking in government’,

Notwithstanding Elinor Ostrom’s well-made warning about ‘the dangers of self-evident truths’, the Labour Party seems committed to reform with Sue Gray already having been tasked to work out what needs to change in Whitehall ‘to make things happen’.⁵

The problem with reorganising Whitehall ‘to make things happen’ is that the law of unintended consequences very often intervenes to deliver the opposite of what was intended. There is also the simple fact that most of the items on the reformers’ shopping list could already be made to happen. These include: more expertise; less manic turnover of officials in jobs; more competence in execution and delivery; stronger commercial, IT and project capability; more interchange with the outside world; and ‘better management of underperformance’.⁶ As such, the central argument of this article is that although a problem exists vis-à-vis central strategic capacity, the CCG’s ‘blueprint’ for reform is unlikely to provide a solution and may worsen things (the main elements of which are highlighted in Table 1, below). This is because the recommendations over-emphasise institutional and procedural design to the detriment of any real focus on people, their relationships, innovations, evidence, leadership or loyalties. Our five main reflections substantiate this argument.

History Matters

History provides a way to learn from previous ill-fated reform efforts in UK government. One of the most obvious—and strangest—elements of the CCG’s final report is that it lacks historical perspective or context. History seems to

Liaison Sub-Committee on Scrutiny of Strategic Thinking in Government, *House of Commons*, session 2023–2024; <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7785/scrutiny-of-strategic-thinking-in-government/>

⁵E. Ostrom, ‘The danger of self-evident truths’, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2000, pp. 33–46; C. Smyth, ‘Labour gives Sue Gray her first task: plot Whitehall revamp’, *Times*, 21 August 2023; <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/labour-gives-sue-gray-her-first-task-plot-whitehall-revamp-nlhg5r8cz>

⁶M. Kingman, ‘Why is civil service reform so hard?’, *Institute for Government*, 16 December 2020; <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/sir-john-kingman-speech.pdf>

Table 1: Commission on the Centre of Government: Proposals for Change

<i>Focus</i>	<i>Proposal</i>	<i>Ambition</i>
Strategic clarity	The government should agree its priorities at the start of a parliament and announce them as part of a modernised King's Speech.	'[T]o translate manifesto promises and other policy ambitions into a coherent programme that directs government activity and frames priorities that cut across departmental boundaries.'
Tighten oversight	The prime minister should appoint an executive cabinet committee made up of a few key ministers.	'[T]o distil the Priorities for Government and recommend them to full cabinet, to hold departments to account for delivery, to agree the government's fiscal rules, spending envelope and departmental budget allocations, and to revisit these matters as necessary.'
Joint problem solving	The prime minister should appoint a new, senior first secretary of state with responsibility for delivering the government's priorities and ministerial responsibility for the civil service.	'[T]o work closely with the chancellor to manage tensions between the government's fiscal objectives and the rest of the government's agenda – allowing the prime minister to retain a strategic, long-term view.'
Core coordination	The Cabinet Office and No. 10 should be restructured into a department of the prime minister and cabinet (DPMC) and a separate department for the civil service.	'DPMC will set the direction of the government and bolster the direct, strategic support for the prime minister . . . clearer staff responsibilities including: a group focused [sic] on government priorities, providing policy expertise, economic advice and analysis, performance and delivery functions to track progress and unblock delivery.'
Civil Service structure	There should be a new statute for the civil service and a 'civil service board' to hold its leadership accountable for reform priorities.	'[T]o hold the leadership accountable for reform priorities and to receive and scrutinise departmental accounts . . . directly connected to delivering the Priorities for Government, but now with its own clear organisational and leadership structure.'
Civil Service leadership	The roles of cabinet secretary (accountable to the prime minister) and head of the civil service (accountable to the first secretary) should be filled by separate individuals.	'[T]he cabinet secretary, leading the DPMC, working as the prime minister's principal civil service adviser and brokering decisions; the head of the civil service, leading the DCS, with statutory responsibility for maintaining the capability of the civil service and accountability to parliament for so doing. Both will be closely involved in the executive committee and advising on the government's priorities.'
Harnessing the Treasury	The government's priorities should be fully reflected in a new, shared strategy, budget and performance management process owned collectively at the centre of government.	'To harness the power of the Treasury to better support collective government objectives . . . To ensure the Priorities for Government are translated into a coherent strategy, collective government priorities will be fully reflected in a new, shared, strategy, budget and performance management process at the centre of government. This will be managed by the secretariat in the new DPMC.'

begin in 2010 with the odd reference to 1997, but with no detailed historical content on the great range of reviews and inquiries—not to mention reforms and innovations—that have been introduced throughout the twentieth century in an attempt to strengthen the centre. Data selected on, for example, units in Number Ten is provided from 1997, civil servants in the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury from 2000, total civil servant numbers from 2009, civil service staff turnover from 2018 and so on. The problem of poor institutional memory is well known within Whitehall and organisations like *History & Policy* exist to demonstrate the value of learning from the past, but the CCG report is almost defined by a thirty-year limit of reflective insight. A methodology which is almost totally dependent on interviewing ministers and senior officials with recent experience of being ‘in’ government is never going to provide historical depth. Subsequently this failure to understand why history matters is odd given that the *Institute for Government* (IfG) has published reports which explain why—when it comes to Whitehall reform and policy making—history does matter.⁷

Sidney Low’s *The Governance of England*, for example, was published exactly 120 years before the CCG’s report, but covers a lot of similar ground with his concern that ‘[t]he stability of our institutions may be exposed to tests more searching than they have recently had to encounter’, proposing to strengthen the position of prime minister over ministerial departments.⁸ Low recommended creating a small ‘inner cabinet’ and, in many ways, the CCG makes exactly the same suggestion with its proposal for an ‘executive cabinet’. Low’s views on ‘government by amateurs’ chimes with the CCG’s concern about generalist civil servants and is itself a perennial theme that has dominated debate since the Northcote-Trevelyan report in the middle of the nineteenth century.⁹ The Haldane and Fulton

reports of 1918 and 1968 respectively raised concerns and made recommendations about the centre of government, whilst the twentieth century was littered with attempts to ‘solve’ the problem that defines the CCG.¹⁰ Cross-departmental ‘overlords’ in the 1950s, a ‘public expenditure survey committee’ in the 1960s, various departmental mergers and amalgamations (‘super-departments’) and ‘programme analysis and review’ frameworks in the 1970s: experiments with strategic units designed to strengthen the centre litter Whitehall’s history. The list goes on: the Central Policy Review Staff (established in 1971), Policy Unit (1974), Efficiency Unit (1979), Performance and Innovation Unit (1988), Strategy Unit (2002)—but all with limited evidence of success.¹¹

In administrative and academic terms, the twentieth century ended with a clear focus—not only on the transition from ‘government to governance’, but also on the existence of a ‘hollow crown’ (that is, a ‘weak core executive’ that urgently needed ‘filling in’ in terms of somehow strengthening the centre).¹² This concern was historically attuned, with the impact of ‘new public management’ in the 1980s and 1990s a major focal point. The main reflection in the context of the CCG’s report is that a great swathe of historical insight into the success or failure of previous reforms is simply not included within the analysis.

George E. Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1854; https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.civilservant.org.uk%2Flibrary%2F1854_Northcote_Trevelyan_Report.pdf&psig=AOvVaw1SN8BgPeU7ETlyDbMsiCS3&ust=1718130619646000&source=images&cd=vfe&opi=89978449&ved=0CAcQrpoMahcKEwjYsse81dCGAxUAAAAAHQAAA AAQBA

¹⁰Viscount Haldane of Cloan, et al., *Report of the Machinery of Government Committee*, London, His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1918; https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://civilservant.org.uk/library/1918_Haldane_Report.pdf; Lord Fulton, et al., *Report of the Committee 1966–68*, London, Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1968; https://www.civilservant.org.uk/csr-fulton_report-findings.html

¹¹M. Flinders, ‘Governance in Whitehall’, *Public Administration*, vol. 80, no. 1, 2002, pp. 51–75.

¹²H. Bakvis, R. A. W. Rhodes and P. Weller, eds., *The Hollow Crown: Countervailing Trends in Core Executives*, London, Palgrave, 1997.

⁷C. Haddon et al., *What is the value of history in policy-making?*, London, IfG, 2015; <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/what-value-history-policy-making>

⁸S. Low, *The Governance of England*, London, Fisher Unwin, 1904, p. 310.

⁹S. H. Northcote and C. E. Trevelyan, *Report on the Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service*, London,

If it had been, the tone of the report might have been far more critical about repackaging well-known proposals and more open to radical thinking.

Criticality matters

Critical assessment is necessary to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions within policy communities about the scope for UK government reform. Past concerns about the culture of Whitehall have warned about the dangers of ‘group think’ (unquestioned assumptions and beliefs devoid of external challenge or empirical evidence). Indeed, the IfG’s 2022 report *Opening Up: How to Strengthen the Civil Service through External Recruitment* focusses on this issue and subsequently influenced many of the recommendations in Lord Maude’s 2023 *Independent Report of Governance and Accountability in the Civil Service*.¹³ The CCG might have taken this invocation on more strongly, to note that what seems like ‘radical’ reforms to some look far more modest to others. Dunleavy takes this argument to its extreme, to describe the commissioners as ‘sixteen (almost) “great and good” elite members—overwhelmingly folks who can be trusted not to rock the boat’, while the IfG describes a more impressive range of backgrounds and perspectives involved in trying to realise a vision for reform that might gain nonpartisan buy-in. Within this range of assessment, it is fair to say that the IfG agenda is more accommodating of accepted wisdom in Whitehall than a recipe for ‘radical reform’. Drawing on a wider range of more critical perspectives could have fostered more meaningful debate on whether the Westminster model, as the dominant meta-constitutional structure, actually remains ‘fit for purpose’.

Instead, this modest set of proposals focusses on manipulating the current machine. Even ‘fairly radical’ reform proposals like those made by Jonathan Slater—a former permanent secretary at the Department for Education who worked in local government before moving into Whitehall—about the need to

open up Civil Service policy advice to external scrutiny in order to improve the quality of decision making are not mentioned. The fact that Slater is an IfG board member makes the omission more interesting.¹⁴ This lack of criticality exposes itself in an obvious root contradiction within the commission’s thinking. The problem statement is set as follows: ‘[i]n recent decades the UK has become a highly centralised country with a closed and weak centre’. This governing interpretation raises two questions: first, how can a country become more centralised in a way that makes the centre weaker? Not only is this potentially intellectually oxymoronic, but it flows into a second question: if more centralisation has led to a ‘closed and weak’ centre, then how is further centralisation in the way suggested by the CCG going to help? If the first reflection suggested historical myopia, then this second reflection is highlighting a lack of fundamental thinking which is genuinely radical, critical or systemic in nature.

Governance matters

Any reform of the UK’s ‘centre’ needs to take seriously its relationship with the wider policy-making system. The governance system in the UK is complex with multiple ‘centres’. It is most appropriately viewed not as a top-down, machine-driven system that is amenable to the assumptions of rationalist policy making, but as an interwoven and fluid system of networks, partnerships and relationships in which simplistic assumptions of planned government from ‘the centre’ are unlikely to work. This new reality explains the analytical focus on forms of ‘meta-governance’ (that is, ‘soft steering’) within cutting-edge administrative research. A shift of thinking matters for at least two reasons. Intellectually, it matters because the highly questionable (if not dangerous) ‘self-evident truth’ that seems to have been swallowed by the commission is that a ‘strong centre’ is itself synonymous with a ‘command and control’ model, which is completely at odds with the insights of modern research about the governance and management of

¹³Institute for Government, *Opening Up: How to Strengthen the Civil Service through External Recruitment*, London, IfG, 2022; <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/civil-service-external-recruitment>

¹⁴J. Slater, *Fixing Whitehall’s Broken Policy Machine*, London, Kings Policy Institute, 2023; <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/fixing-whitehalls-broken-policy-machine.pdf>

public sector systems. Empirically this matters because the UK is—and has been for some time—defined by an emergent framework of multilevel governance which consists of horizontal and vertical dimensions and inevitably demands a reinterpretation of the role of the centre.¹⁵ What is missing from the CCG is any detailed consideration of broader governing relationships with the devolved governments and parliaments in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, let alone how they demand a reformulation of traditional assumptions about central strategic capacity in the UK. The ‘wider state sector’ of executive agencies, non-departmental public bodies, local authorities, integrated care systems, hybrid partnerships, and so on, are all part of the complex tapestry through which the UK is governed.¹⁶

Reflecting upon why governance matters is critical because any strengthening of the centre—particularly in the manner recommended by the CCG—will inevitably have knock-on consequences for other actors and relationships at a multiplicity of levels. Looking ‘on the bright side’, the value of the CCG is that it certainly focussed attention on what students of public administration, governance and public policy would label a ‘hollow crown’. The problem is that by (i) failing to access historical insights, (ii) failing to embrace proactively critical or disruptive viewpoints and (iii) only focussing on Whitehall, the reform agenda risks falling into an intellectual trap of its own making. Any further hoarding of power in Whitehall risks exacerbating inter-organisational tensions, limiting policy flexibility, producing polarisation and possibly even resurrecting concerns about presidentialism. It is also overly simplistic to think that the answer to a ‘hollow crown’ has to be greater ‘command and control’ capacity when a more sophisticated answer—which takes inspiration from examples of good practice and good governance within and beyond the UK—might instead focus on

building a ‘strategic brain’ with the capacity to coordinate distributed networks. A ‘strong centre’ can be compatible with devolved authority, more local autonomy and greater input from experts and communities at great distance from the centre of government. This reintroduces the notion of ‘meta-governance’ and encourages some reflection in relation to why evidence matters.

Evidence matters

Reform proposals need a firm grip of the relevant evidence on current problems and what works to address them. Of course, this includes a wealth of IfG reports summarising insights from experienced policy actors in Westminster and Whitehall. However, as Dunleavy notes with characteristic vigour, there is a far stronger and deeper academic and practice-based research evidence base from which to draw. On the one hand, the assembled commissioners and IfG analysts were very well placed to offer the insider perspective, having produced a vast array of reports that form much of the evidentiary backdrop to the claims in the CCG. On the other, they did not draw on a wealth of evidence on how strategic capacity at the centre of government works elsewhere that might have helped to shake up thinking and offer a fresher array of alternatives.

For example, evidence from the ‘Scottish policy style’ could have offered food for thought.¹⁷ In post-devolution Scotland, the idea of a ‘strong centre’ was separated from assumptions concerning the role, relevance and centrality of the Westminster model. Instead, strength was redefined as being a ‘strategic state’; that is, a future-orientated centre that operates across diffuse networks of governance via the robust underpinnings of shared goals.¹⁸ This was combined with an attempt to facilitate truly collaborative approaches to policy implementation which was arguably exemplified in the ‘getting it

¹⁵I. Bache and M. Flinders, eds., *Multi-Level Governance*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004.

¹⁶M. Flinders, *Delegated Governance and the British State*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008; I. C. Elliott, et al., ‘The fragmentation of public administration: differentiated and decentered governance in the (dis)United Kingdom’, *Public Administration*, vol. 100, no. 1, 2022, pp. 98–115.

¹⁷P. Cairney and E. St Denny, *Why isn't Government Policy more Preventative?*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019.

¹⁸I. C. Elliott, ‘The implementation of a strategic state in a small country setting—the case of the “Scottish approach”’, *Public Money & Management*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2020, pp. 285–293.

right for every child' early-years initiative.¹⁹ The challenges and subsequent evolution of the 'strategic state' in Scotland provide—as Ian Elliott has demonstrated—important insights for anyone interested in seeking to strengthen strategic state capacity in Whitehall.²⁰ More specifically—and with the Scottish experience in mind—it is possible to argue that thinking about strategic capacity at the national level must be intricately woven into—rather than detached from—the emerging devolution and place-based agenda in the UK. This is particularly true given the increased utilisation of different forms of evidence, the potential of behavioural insights and the use of innovations in public engagement to improve the design and delivery of policy.²¹ Folding these insights back towards the core recommendations of the CCG, a more nuanced view of a 'strong centre' emerges with a remit to:

- offer 'strategic clarity' by setting the 'what' in terms of policy objectives but leaving open the 'how' in terms of achieving them;
- improve relationships through collaboration rather than reaching yet again to 'tighten oversight' through new and potentially divisive institutional mechanisms;
- encourage 'joint problem solving' by strengthening the web of relations across governing institutions, but without having to make any new structures of 'core coordination';
- enable and empower effective 'civil service leadership' without enacting disruptive changes to the 'civil service structure'; and
- 'harness the Treasury' in tune with a more holistic strategic agenda without repeating the excesses of Blair-era 'performance management systems' that led at times to perverse incentives and outcomes.

¹⁹E. Coles, et al., 'Getting it right for every child', *The Milbank Quarterly*, vol. 94, no. 2, 2016, pp. 334–365.

²⁰I. C. Elliott, 'The strategic state: a case study of devolved government in Scotland', in C. Greve and T. Ysa, eds., *Handbook on Strategic Public Management*, London, Edward Elgar, 2023, pp. 75–90.

²¹G. Mulgan, *The Synthesis Gap*, n.d.; <https://www.geoffmulgan.com/post/the-synthesis-gap-reducing-the-imbalance-between-advice-and-absorption-in-handling-big-challenges>

Combining the four reflections considered so far leads to a fairly simple conclusion that the CCG adopted a well-trodden path of fixating on the Whitehall machinery of government (that is, the core executive) without considering the broader webs of multilevel governance within which SW1 exists. The key reflection is that what makes complex networks and webs or organisations 'work' and what provides a form of structural glue or coordinating capacity is not sharp-edged, top-down performance management systems, but 'connective tissue'—the crucial 'political fascia' of governance.

Relationships matter

The final reflection is simply that mechanistic metaphors exaggerate the simplicity of reform and do not consider the importance of managing relationships with people and organisations. The British state is too often discussed in terms of the 'machinery of government', which brings with it a structural and mechanistic lexicon of terms that sound like a script from *Yes, Minister*. 'Managing the machine' involves 'driving through change' through the use of 'policy levers', 'delivery chains' and 'boundary-spanners' with the intention of 'stepping up a gear', 'changing direction' or 'increasing efficiency'. And yet, as Jake Chapman argued over twenty years ago, such reductionist and mechanistic thinking provides false presumptions of control and predictability.²² There is a strong 'deliver-ology' thrust running throughout the CCG's report and an explicit assumption that running a government is just like running a business, with strategic priorities backed by a performance management system based on a simple cost-benefit analysis. The problem is that this is not how successful businesses operate—especially in conditions of change and uncertainty—and the complex governance system through which the British state now designs and delivers policy is not, cannot, and should not be understood through

²²J. Chapman, *System Failure: Why Governments Must Learn to Think Differently*, London, Demos, 2004; <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/systemfailure2.pdf>; L. Richardson, C. Durose and B. Perry, 'Moving towards hybridity in causal explanation: the example of citizen participation', *Social Policy and Administration*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2019, pp. 265–278.

mechanistic metaphors or business school buzzwords.

It is more accurately understood as an ecosystem or cascading set of relationships and learning-loops which all depend on the existence of a connective tissue which is generally relational rather than structural. As Miranda Curtis told the CCG, the most successful organisations ‘have “connective tissue” that allows different parts of the organisation to collaborate towards the same goal or purpose.’ But the weakness of the CCG’s final recommendations is that they tend to interpret ‘connective tissue’ in terms of legal structures, formal processes, institutional change and organisational restructuring as classic ‘machinery of government reforms’. What they have not done is step back to consider whether there might be value in returning to first principles in order to modify behaviours, beliefs and basic assumptions and, through this, think less about ‘command and control’ and more about ‘coordinating complexity’. Greater historical awareness might have revealed a litany of failed attempts to ‘rewire’ the government machine and therefore highlight the need for fresh thinking. The inclusion of critical thinkers and radical ideas—or simply a review of the academic evidence on more collaborative and human-centred approaches—might have created space for innovation.²³ Acknowledging the existence of an administrative world beyond Whitehall would have nudged the commissioners towards systemic thinking and a closer engagement with the existing academic evidence would undoubtedly have encouraged pause for thought.

Reflecting on why relationships matter helps isolate another distinctive and likely problematic dimension of the CCG’s report: it is decidedly technocratic in approach and arguably depoliticised in tone. The final report and its recommendations seem to assume that offices and structures matter in Whitehall, when it is political weight and relationships that arguably matter more. It is at this point

that the root weakness of the CCG is exposed as the final report notes:

We recognise that there are many factors that weigh heavily on the effectiveness of the centre that we cannot address. Foremost is the quality of the prime minister’s leadership. Nor can we influence the economic and political context in which the centre operates, including the size of the government’s majority in a House of Commons. The talents of officials and advisers in the centre, and how well the civil service is managed, are also vital.²⁴

Any focus on the ‘connective tissue’—the relational fascia—that binds political systems together is therefore excluded from a report on ‘strengthening the centre’ despite the fact that the most important dimension to successful governance are the skills, attributes and values—commitment, trust and loyalty—of the people who work within the system. Thinking innovatively and embracing international insights about training, support structures, cultural awareness, emotional intelligence, strategic scaffolding, mentorship and so on to enhance the leadership skills of ministers and officials are relatively low-cost but potentially high-gain ways of forging genuinely ‘radical’ governance capabilities—capabilities, that is, which understand the role of relationships, especially within political contexts.²⁵

It is this lack of political antennae on the likely consequences of many of the proposals on key political relationships which gives the report an oddly detached and depoliticised tone. The recommendation that a government should nail down its priorities at the very start of a Parliament—announcing them as part of a modernised King’s Speech—may have some merit, but questions remain about the extent to which local areas, directly elected mayors and local leaders might be involved in this process. How would local areas shape this process to ensure local democracy, place sensitivity and buy-in for implementation? The suggestion that ‘the prime minister should

²³L. Lata, et al., ‘Advancing collaborative social outcomes through place-based solutions—aligning policy and funding systems’, *Policy and Society*, 2024; <https://academic.oup.com/policyandsociety/advance-article/doi/10.1093/polsoc/puae018/7678869>

²⁴IfG, *Power with Purpose*, p. 12.

²⁵T. Kerkhoff and D. Moschopoulos, eds., *The Education and Training of Public Servants. Governance and Public Management*, London, Palgrave, 2023; K. A. Bottom, et al., eds., *The Handbook of Teaching Public Administration*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2022.

appoint an executive cabinet committee made up of a few key ministers' also risks sowing division and discord rather than increasing strategic capacity. Civil servants would immediately gravitate towards responding to 'the optics' coming from members of the executive cabinet, rather than necessarily working to the instructions of their departmental minister. Those members of the cabinet who were not selected for the inner circle would feel resentful—and resentment fuels division. Those promoted to the inner clique may well feel inspired and empowered to focus on their own career ambitions to the detriment of the collective endeavour. John Major and Gordon Brown raised serious concerns about this proposal at the launch of the report. A 'quadrumvirate' would be 'very difficult', suggested Gordon Brown before highlighting that as a workable idea it had an 'inauspicious' feel and pointed to King Herod and the Gang of Four in communist China as examples.²⁶

Dunleavy jumps on the inclusion of 'such obvious political non-starters' and asks '[w]hy did no one apparently seek to challenge or stress-test the emerging 'line' for feasibility?' This article's reflections on why history, criticality, governance, evidence and relationships matter hopefully helps to answer this question in a much more constructive way.

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²⁶Institute for Government, *Fixing the Centre of Government*, online event, IfG, 11 March 2024; <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/event/fix-centre-government>