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The Long March Through Whitehall: A Comment on Lowe and Pemberton, *The Official History of the British Civil Service, Volume II: 1982–1997*

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Abstract
The Thatcher-Major 'permanent revolution' massively changed the British civil service and Whitehall. The political clout provided by strong prime ministerial backing was a key factor in sustaining the momentum of change over the 1980s and 1990s. The process of change developed piecemeal, in a step-by-step and, in some ways, even haphazard fashion, with 'New Right' ideology just one factor. Economic and financial constraints were important in driving and sustaining the Whitehall efficiency drives and managerial reforms of the period. Support from managerially minded insiders and skilful prime ministerial businessmen advisers brought in from outside were also crucial. In contrast, the Johnson government's approach to civil service reform may be self-defeating if it creates too much instability and needless strife, rather than building on ideas and building up support at different levels from within Whitehall itself.

Keywords: Thatcher, Major, civil service, Johnson, Whitehall reform

HAROLD WILSON WAS once described as displaying 'a profound reverence for the orders and mysteries of the civil service'. The Labour prime minister, it was said, 'would be most upset if he ever thought he had caused serious offence to a permanent secretary'.[1] Margaret Thatcher, in contrast, showed no such reverence towards the Whitehall system and made causing serious offence to the mandarin class and what it stood for into a central plank of her government's policy after 1979.

Twentieth century prime ministers, on the whole, were content to leave civil servants to run the civil service—Mrs Thatcher was not. She was radical in her refusal to recognise the career civil service as an institutional interest in its own right, in her drive to 'deprivilege' it (in terms of pay, pensions, job security), and in her resolve to tackle what she saw as Whitehall's inefficiencies and political pretensions. Her successor, John Major, was not in her mould of the 'anti-system' conviction politician, and adopted a more consensual and emollient style, but nevertheless, after 1990, pressed ahead with further Whitehall and public services reforms, with the scope and the pace of change, if anything, intensifying. The subtitle of the second volume of *The Official History of the British Civil Service*, written by Rodney Lowe and Hugh Pemberton—*The Thatcher and Major Revolutions*—tells it all.[2]

If the Lowe and Pemberton theme is of 'profound crisis' for the civil service and 'fundamental reform' building up over the years 1982–97, the contrast with the central theme of Rodney Lowe's first volume of the *Official History*, described in the subtitle as covering *The Fulton Years, 1966–81* but with extensive historical background on the Northcote-Trevelyan and Fisher-Bridges eras, is strong.[3] For all the Whitehall upheavals and reform initiatives of the 1960s and early 1970s—the Plowden Committee, the (overrated) Fulton report, Heath's 'New Style of Government', constant reorganisation and rejigging of the departmental machinery—Lowe's story there is, in the end, of the failure or frustration of 'modernisation'. What accounted for the difference in the Thatcher-Major era?

The political clout provided by strong prime ministerial backing from Margaret Thatcher and John Major was certainly a key factor in sustaining the momentum of change. After a couple of years, Harold Wilson and then

Edward Heath had each seemed to lose their interest in and appetite for Whitehall reform. Thatcher was different and she did not let go of the issue or get diverted. Major kept up the pressure after 1990, partly as a way of establishing his own political identity (the Citizen's Charter being his 'big idea') and perhaps partly because this was an area where his embattled government could actually be seen to be doing something and getting results. Successive election victories and a long hold on office after 1979 allowed the Conservatives' reforms to build up a powerful momentum.

The civil service for much of the twentieth century had the character of a self-governing institution, confident in its power, a force to be reckoned with, and secure in its role in the government of the country. The most senior mandarins—Warren Fisher, Edward Bridges, Norman Brook, William Armstrong—arguably had more influence on the development of the civil service than either politicians or outside committees of inquiry and royal commissions of the 'good and the great' (the Fulton Committee being the last of this type of independent inquiry into the civil service).[4] Whitley negotiations with the civil service staff-side trade unions baked in a consensual and incremental pattern of change from within. However, two seminal events in 1981 (dealt with in Lowe's first volume) cleared the way for more a forceful and muscular approach, with elected politicians in the driving seat—the defeat of the twenty-one-week civil service strike (over pay) of that year and the abolition of the Civil Service Department (seen by Thatcher more as standing up for the civil service than as a driver of managerial change).

There was no Thatcherite blueprint or coherent strategy for a Whitehall revolution evident in 1979. Instead, there were Mrs Thatcher's gut instincts and prejudices, and a general Conservative faith in the superiority of private sector business methods. The process of change then developed piecemeal, in a step-by-step and, in some ways, even haphazard fashion. The influence of New Right thinking should not be exaggerated, certainly in the early 1980s. Later on, the government's actions were often presented as an ideologically coherent programme involving a fundamental rethink of the role of government ('steering not rowing' became the mantra in the 1990s), often with reference to American public choice theories and management gurus, but even then, ideology was just one factor and probably not the most important. British public administration scholars were, as usual, kept firmly outside in the cold.

The fact that the key management reforms eventually won all-party backing, and were to some extent based on earlier Fultonite ideas endorsed by Labour, suggests that they should not be seen as a simple 'right-wing' phenomenon. The role of Labour MP Giles Radice on Parliament's Treasury and Civil Service Select Committee was important in building that bipartisan support. After 1997, Tony Blair's New Labour government continued with executive agencies, 'charterism', contracting-out and the focus on management, efficiency and performance, though often relabelling or rebadging administrative programmes and techniques. And nor was Britain's experience unique, given the broadly similar 'new public management' reform programmes seen in other countries under governments of different political complexions in this period.

An additional factor explaining the success of the push for civil service reform in the 1980s and 1990s, compared to the 1960s, is the changed context within which Whitehall and governments were operating. The assumption in the Fulton era was of rising public spending, 'big government' and expanding state activities. But from the mid-1970s onwards, the economic constraints were much more pressing. The experience of economic crisis and hard times led to a tighter control over budgets and a questioning of the functions of the state. The party was well and truly over. This sharper external pressure was an important background element in sustaining the efficiency drives and cutbacks of the 1980s (and continuing in the 1990s).

Successful bureaucratic reform needs strong support from inside the machine. William Armstrong was sometimes depicted as having sabotaged or watered down the Fulton reforms as civil service chief in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but in fact the constraints imposed on him by the vested interests of the civil service unions and by the federal character of the civil service, with the need to persuade, cajole and negotiate with the different departments and sceptical senior Whitehall barons, were significant drags on reform in that period.[5] In the later Thatcher period and

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throughout the Major years, Robin Butler's decision to concentrate more on his Head of the Civil Service management role than on the Cabinet Secretary and prime ministerial courtier role that had absorbed his predecessor, Robert Armstrong, made a decisive difference, as Lowe and Pemberton acknowledge.[6]

More generally, the emergence of a new breed of managerially minded senior officials mattered. In contrast to the Fulton period, when the top mandarins had entered Whitehall in the 1930s and 1940s and had made their careers in the halcyon postwar period when resource constraints were loose, the new breed had joined in the 1960s, had taken Fulton seriously, were more cost-conscious and more open to change than their predecessors.

Crucially important too in terms of the mechanics of the reform process was the role played by the outside businessmen brought in as Thatcher's Efficiency Advisers, Derek Rayner from Marks and Spencer and then Robin Ibbs from ICI. Earlier in the 1970s, Heath had imported some business advisers to try to improve government organisation and decision making but they (mostly) had made little impact then. In the 1980s, strong and active prime ministerial support and backing gave Rayner vital clout, but also important was the skilful way he worked with departments and identified allies inside the civil service to generate an internal reform dynamic through his 'scrutiny programme' and 'efficiency strategy'.

A key part of this process was the way in which the Efficiency Unit, and later the Next Steps Unit (particularly under the forceful and unstereotypical top civil servant, Peter Kemp) and the Citizen's Charter Unit, showed how small and focussed teams of committed reformist officials could prod, push and proselytise: wearing down departmental inertia or resistance, keeping up the pressure for change, and leveraging reform ideas and initiatives. There had been nothing like these Whitehall guerrilla fighters working to push through the Fulton reforms, which had got bogged down in the bureaucratic process.

The Thatcher-Major 'permanent revolution', as it gathered pace, massively changed the Whitehall landscape. The civil service was slashed in size from over 700,000 in 1979 to less than half a million by 1997. Next Steps agencies, the Citizen's Charter, market testing and contracting out initiatives had, as Lowe and Pemberton show, a huge cumulative impact on the organisation of government and on the management and delivery of services. The pre-Citizen's Charter civil service did need to become more responsive to the public-as-consumer. The reforms delivered real benefits in terms of improved operational and financial management, efficiency gains and cost effectiveness, even if some of the claims about improved quality of services were more debatable.

But the constant waves of reform also had a destabilising effect on staff and their morale. Furthermore, there were real problems concerning the arrangements for ensuring accountability in the much more fragmented world of executive agencies, delegated management and a more 'Balkanised' civil service. In politically charged situations there was shown to be plenty of scope for blurred accountability and buck passing between ministers and agency chief executives and civil service managers when things went wrong. The government and the Whitehall top brass themselves were arguably too blasé or even disingenuous about the constitutional implications of the Next Steps and other managerial changes for parliamentary and public accountability, and the meaning of ministerial responsibility.

The myth that the real-world Sir Humphreys could always resist change or 'see off' elected ministers who had radical intentions and clear priorities was finally laid to rest in the 1980s and 1990s. The Thatcherites scorned Whitehall's consensus outlook and the departmental orthodoxies, and were determined to assert their political authority over the mandarinate. 'Macho ministerial management' often seemed to be the order of the day. However, the allegations that the Conservatives 'politicised' the higher civil service in this period were understandable but exaggerated. In fact, some of Thatcher's supporters were disappointed by the failure to bring in large numbers of politically committed business outsiders. Rather than a crudely partisan politicisation effect, there was more of a socialisation effect, in the sense that a whole generation of officials learned that advancement went to the 'can-do' types—tough-minded managers who could get things done and deliver results for their political masters—while the traditional, cautious 'snag-hunting' bureaucrats languished.

The sort of detachment or 'neutral competence' once expected of the senior mandarins in advising on and then implementing policy was no longer enough. Also, ministers seemed to trust civil servants less and not want to listen to their advice on policy. Decisions were increasingly taken in more informal ways (with fewer properly organised committees with supporting minutes and documentation), often at meetings of ministers and special advisers from which officials were excluded. Lowe and Pemberton show clearly how, in the pursuit of a civil service more responsive to the government of the day, the devaluing of the continuity, experience in depth, and more impartial or objective approach to policy ('speaking truth unto power') institutionalised in the civil service was raising serious questions about Whitehall's traditional 'Northcote-Trevelyan' values and about the policy-making capacity of the state machine by the mid-1990s.

'Reform will go on and on' Robin Butler warned the civil service in 1996 and, sure enough, there was no let-up in the pressure for and the process of administrative reform after the election of the New Labour government in 1997, nor again after the change of government in 2010.[7] It is not clear, however, whether there will be the sort of detailed paper trail and records available covering the period since the late 1990s, or the official backing and support, for any future official historians of Whitehall to produce a Lowe and Pemberton-style excavation-in-depth and audit of the civil service reforms of the last two decades.

History does not repeat itself, but are the ingredients that made for the success of the earlier Thatcher-Major civil service revolution present today? Dominic Cummings, formerly Boris Johnson's chief adviser, seemed absolutely to delight in inflicting serious offence (and much more) on civil service permanent secretaries. Cummings combined total contempt for the organisation, methods, culture and personnel of the state machine with iron determination to drive through change, even in the middle of dealing with the huge challenges of Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic, the poor handling of both of which, he argued, underlines the case for fundamental transformation in Whitehall. Boris Johnson personally has never shown much sign of a detailed understanding of the machinery and processes of government, and only time will show whether he will or can provide the sort of sustained prime ministerial interest and commitment shown by Thatcher and Major that was central to shaping, driving through and maintaining the reform impetus in the 1980s and 1990s.

There is a danger that Cummings's combative methods and approach may have toxified the issue and therefore jeopardised what might otherwise be seen as sensible and necessary reforms to skills, analytical and technical capabilities, recruitment and organisation in Whitehall. Alarm about the apparent purging of some senior permanent secretaries also raises the temperature in a way that hinders rather than helps the forging of a bipartisan consensus around reform. Recent changes in Number Ten have brought in more conventional figures to advise and support the Prime Minister and introduce more order and process at the top, and that may help defuse some of the tensions.

While many officials understand and accept the need for change, the government's approach may be self-defeating if it creates too much instability and needless strife, rather than building on ideas and building up support at different levels from within Whitehall itself, as Rayner and Ibbs did for their political masters in the 1980s. Ditching the Cummings-style revolutionary *sturm und drang* might actually open the way to more quietly constructive change and reform in Whitehall.

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Notes

[1] Quoted in: K. Theakston, *The Labour Party and Whitehall*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 34.

[2] R. Lowe and H. Pemberton, *The Official History of the British Civil Service: Reforming the Civil Service, Volume II: The Thatcher and Major Revolutions, 1982–97*, London, Routledge, 2020.

[3] Lowe and Pemberton, *Volume II*, pp. 360, 369. R. Lowe, *The Official History of the British Civil Service: Reforming the Civil Service, Volume I, The Fulton years, 1966–81*, London, Routledge, 2011.

[4] K. Theakston, *Leadership in Whitehall*, London, Macmillan, 1999.

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[5] K. Theakston and P. Connelly, *William Armstrong and British Policy Making*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
[6] Lowe and Pemberton, *Volume II*, pp. 169–70, 362.
[7] Quoted in: K. Theakston, 'A permanent revolution in Whitehall: the Major governments and the civil service', in P. Dorey, ed., *The Major Premiership: Politics and Policies under John Major, 1990-97*, London, Macmillan, 1999, p. 37. D. Richards, *New Labour and the Civil Service*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. P. Diamond, *The End of Whitehall?*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.