

THE EVOLUTION OF THE UNITED KINGDOM  
CIVIL SERVICE  
1848-1997

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*(The paper expresses the personal opinions of the author and in no way should be taken to represent  
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## 1. ORIGINS

Descriptions of any evolutionary process, lasting 150 years, must, as in the Darwinian example, begin with the origins of the species. The British civil service - what the document in question refers to as "the Permanent Civil Service" - can be said to have assumed its modern form as the result of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report<sup>1</sup> laid before Parliament on 23rd November 1853, which arose from an enquiry set up in Her Majesty's Treasury in 1848, and signed by Stafford Northcote and by Charles Trevelyan. Later convention would describe one of these as a politician (Northcote, to become a Minister and indeed Chancellor and Foreign Secretary) and the other as an official (head of the Treasury) - but at the time this distinction was less evident than it was to become exactly as the result of their work. Like many of the documents to be cited here, this is valuable both as *reportage* and as evidence.

Before 1854 servants of the Crown, which was and remains the core definition of British civil servants, were appointed to office "by ministers acting for the Crown without regard to age or qualification in return for political support or out of personal interest"<sup>2</sup>. There were a good number of them - "not less than 16,000 persons" Northcote-Trevelyan stated and the line between those who acted in the political world and those who acted as their servants in the conduct of public business was weak and porous. The quality of those appointed to work in office was perceived to be poor. Northcote-Trevelyan characterise them as follows

Admission into the civil service is indeed generally sought after, but it is for the unambitious, and the indolent or incapable that it is chiefly desired. Those whose abilities do not warrant an expectation that they will succeed in the open professions, where they must encounter the competition of their contemporaries, and those whom indolence of temperament, or physical infirmities unfit for active exertions, are placed in the civil service, where they may obtain an honourable livelihood with little labour and with no risk; where their success depends upon their simply avoiding any flagrant misconduct, and attending with moderate regularity to routine duties...Those who enter it generally do so at an early age, when there has been no opportunity of trying their fitness for business...

and their appointment was the result of patronage:

The chief of the department will probably bestow the office upon the son or dependant of someone having personal or political claims upon him...

While the fragmented nature of the service led to difficulties

Each man's experience, interest, hopes and fears are limited to the special branch of service in which he himself is engaged. The effect, naturally, is to cramp the energies of the whole body, to encourage the growth of narrow views and departmental prejudices, to limit the acquisition of experience...

The answers to these problems of a badly functioning administrative system were determined to be as follows:

- "a proper system of examination before appointment"
- "a central Board for conducting the examination...at its head a Privy Councillor"
- "a certificate" of qualification as having passed the relevant examination would be needed
- "a proper system of transfers" between departments
- there should be "a proper distinction between intellectual and mechanical labour"
- "promotion by merit" should be strictly supervised
- annual increments of salary should be conditional upon satisfactory work.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Northcote-Trevelyan Report* was first published in Parliamentary Papers, 1854, volume xxvii, but it is more accessible today as Appendix B of the *Fulton Report*, Cmnd 3638, June 1968.

<sup>2</sup> Anson, *The Law and Custom of the Constitution*, volume II, 1935, p.236

As a result it was hoped that the public would in the future be served by a thoroughly efficient and professional body of staff.

## **2. EMBEDDING PROFESSIONALISM**

The nineteenth century ideal of *professionalism* was very clearly incorporated by the report into their new model civil service. Not only would a service recruited and run in such a way be professional, but it could claim to be meritorious. Competitive “literary examination ... to test the intelligence as well as the mere attainments” as they put it would be objective, avoid patronage and ensure the survival of the fittest. In particular, Whitehall - the generic term for the civil service - was to be opened up to the meritorious products of the finest British universities, “a non-political administrative class educated in the moral values of a liberal education further developed by a reformed Oxford and Cambridge”.<sup>3</sup> Above all, it was the quality of the personnel that Northcote-Trevelyan sought to improve. They wanted

permanent officers subordinate to Ministers yet possessing sufficient independence, character, ability and experience to be able to advise, assist, and to some extent to influence those who are from time to time set above them...

Although there was immense contemporary controversy the plans of the report were eventually put into effect. In 1855 a Civil Service Commission was appointed, in 1859 the Superannuation Act ensured that civil service pensions would only be paid to those who had received civil service certificates from the Commission and in 1870 an Order in Council of 4th June set up the system of competitive examinations. The different “Classes” of the service were introduced in stages. In 1876 the Lower Division (later the Executive Class) was created and after 1918 the Clerical and the Administrative, while it took until the 1940s to create the Professional, Technical and Scientific Classes.<sup>4</sup>

Northcote-Trevelyan, and the Liberal Governments of the 19th century<sup>5</sup> carried through the first revolution in government<sup>6</sup>

they obtained the abolition of patronage and corruption, of amateurism and inefficiency, extravagance and waste, secrecy and lack of accountability, and their replacement by selection and promotion by merit, by professional efficiency, retrenchment and economy, publicity and full financial accountability ...transformation of the old multifarious collection of ‘persons in public offices’, chiefly the personal appointees and dependants of individual ministers, into a modern, integrated civil service...

With the creation also in 1867 of the Public Accounts Committee in the House of Commons and its idea of the Accounting Officer as an official answerable uniquely to the House of Commons, the civil service by the end of the century had definitively become modern.

And one more brick in the wall needs to be added. It is taken so much for granted by British civil servants that we barely notice it. The Gladstone Government of 1884 determined, by an Order in Council dated 29 November 1884 that “*a civil servant standing for election in a constituency must resign his post when he announces himself as a candidate*”<sup>7</sup>. Hence the line dividing the British political class and its official class became and remains clear in this respect - that the one is basically a parliamentary class, the other is not<sup>8</sup>. And since, by another convention of British government ministers can only come from the Houses of Parliament, it also means that the gulf between a career official and his or her Minister is wide.

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<sup>3</sup> See Peter Hennessy, *Whitehall*, 1989, p.31.

<sup>4</sup> See Lord Bridges, *The Treasury*, London, 1964

<sup>5</sup> The Northcote-Trevelyan report was published while W.E.Gladstone was Chancellor of the Exchequer under the premiership of the Earl of Aberdeen.

<sup>6</sup> See Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society*, 1969, p.320.

<sup>7</sup> Anson, p.230, Note 3. It is worth mentioning that in early April 1997, the Cabinet Office circulated reminders to all civil servants that the same rules still apply, apropos of the 1 May General Election.

<sup>8</sup> Although certain officials have been widely accused of crossing the political line, they must remain officials unless they stand for Parliament.

This detachment from political life is one of the things that is meant by the term “permanent” which has such a long and significant history in relation to our subject. As Anson puts it

They are severed from political life not merely by the Statutes which disable them sitting in the House of Commons but by the usage of the Civil Service which secures that the members of the service remain free to serve the government of the day...the parliamentary chief changes, but they are unaffected by the ebb and flow of political opinion.

Given that governments and ministers in the United Kingdom may change with immense rapidity (more perceived as a truth in the 1920s than in the 1990s) it would be absurd, he argued, for the British service to have its heads changed by new ministers equally frequently. In the USA an administration is constitutionally guaranteed four years of life, not so in the United Kingdom. But Anson goes on to add, most significantly<sup>9</sup>

It is well to bear in mind that the permanence of the civil service is really only a matter of convention...it would be perfectly legal, though wholly unconstitutional, for an incoming minister to obtain from the Crown as a proof of confidence the dismissal of every civil servant who holds office during his pleasure.

It was with a moderate-sized service that the British state fought the Great War of 1914-18. Around 100,000 civil servants worked in different departments.<sup>10</sup> After the war the central coordination of the service was given to the Treasury<sup>11</sup>. Under the leadership of officials like Sir Warren Fisher, there evolved the ethos of a single service to work alongside the military services.<sup>12</sup> The only major machinery of government change that occurred during the war was the creation of the Cabinet Office, initially by Prime Minister Lloyd George, under Sir Maurice Hankey. This had as its main function the preparation of papers and records of Cabinet meetings but it was to gradually evolve into a central function in the system alongside the Treasury.

### **3. THE ADMINISTRATIVE CLASS**

Fifty years after Northcote-Trevelyan the system that they had sought to introduce was in full flow. The Tomlin Royal Commission 1929-1931<sup>13</sup> examined the British Civil Service and found it good. At that time there were 424,000 civil servants (of whom 122,000 were “industrial”, involved in for example supporting the Armed Forces, and the rest “non-industrial”) and of which 79,022 were women. Most civil servants had been appointed after competitive examination for “the Civil Service Commission’s certificate is an essential preliminary to any employment in the civil service”. There were at that point six classes

- the Administrative Class
- the Executive Class
- the Clerical Class
- a writing assistant class
- a shorthand -typing class
- a typist class

and for each class an appropriate examination had to be passed. In the case of the Administrative Class this was at the level of an honours degree in a university and at age 22-24, in the case of the clerical at age 16-17 and at the level of a secondary school. Women, as Anson put it “are in general admitted on

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<sup>9</sup> Anson, pp.230-233.

<sup>10</sup> See Annex 2.

<sup>11</sup> Order in Council 22 July 1920 empowered the Treasury to control the conduct of the civil service and to regulate classification, remuneration and other conditions of service. A Department of the Treasury under the control of an under-secretary was responsible. Anson, p.238.

<sup>12</sup> “After the First World war transferability of staff was strongly fostered by the then Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, who did much in the 1920s to break down barriers between Departments” quoted in Chapman, *Style in Administration*, ed. Chapman, 1973, p.48. On Friday 18 August 1939 the “Service Match” at Lords, often Navy or RAF cricketers, featured “The Civil Service *Versus* MCC.

<sup>13</sup> Cmd 3909

the same terms as men, but they must be unmarried or widows” and a single woman on marriage was obliged to resign. Movement between Classes was rare although not impossible, given that a requisite examination had to be passed.

The heart of the system was the Administrative Class, those who were recruited and trained especially to deal with Parliament and Ministers and to make policy, products of the best university education and not ashamed to live with the title of “mandarin”. In general, in order to avoid the narrowness and provincialism of which Northcote had so disapproved, good and promising officials were rotated quickly between posts, both in the same department and, in the case of the very best, between departments. In 1920 it was decided that the Prime Minister was required to give his assent to appointments in top posts in all departments, so that in filling such posts it would be clear that the field of selection would be the whole service.

Those who ran the system from the late 19th-century onwards would have described themselves as professional administrators. It was a class with great pride in its achievements and a sure grasp of its practical skill. Lyndall Urwick, in 1942, at which time there was a great practical need for competence, wrote that<sup>14</sup>

The ability to administer other people is a skill, an art...it is not just a body of knowledge...Broadly speaking, administrative skill is very comparable with medical skill. It is a practical art, and practice is essential to make it perfect...

But the most perfect statement of the administrative ethos was to be found in the Rede lecture delivered at the University of Cambridge in 1950 by Sir Edward Bridges, onetime Cabinet Secretary and the son of the poet Robert. His “Portrait of a Profession” is a perfect cameo of both the attitudes and the literary style of the Administrative Class at the height of its pride. It had, after all, just won the war and built the Welfare State<sup>15</sup>

By degrees, then, as Civil Service organisation has got into its stride, there has been built up in every department a store of knowledge and experience in the subjects handled which eventually takes shape as a practical philosophy... departmental point of view...it is the duty of a civil servant to give his Minister the fullest benefit of the storehouse of departmental experience; and to let the waves of the practical philosophy wash against ideas put forward by his Ministerial master...

or to take another example

Few Civil Servants are ever completely responsible for the work they are doing... he has much less consciousness than other professional men that the work he does is his own individual achievement, and is inevitably far more conscious than others that the work he does is part of something greater than himself...

and another

a Civil Servant is bound to be well aware of the political content of his work... at the same time he is the least political of all animals...Detached, at times almost aloof, he must be if he is to maintain a proper impartiality between the many claims and interests that will be urged upon him...

Sir Edward’s effortlessly olympian (and to a modern eye unconsciously masculine) style speaks of a sense of the British Civil Service as an achieved state of excellence, arrived at after long evolution, based upon accepted truths, validated by a victorious experience in “the last war”. The era from which he spoke lasted all through the 1950s, with men from the ministry running the Commonwealth and avoiding European entanglements. Like so much in British life these certainties did not survive the 1960s.

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *Style in Administration*, ed. Chapman, 1973, p.20.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, pp.50-56

#### **4. DEFINING THE PROBLEM DIFFERENTLY : FULTON**

The names of a small number of politicians are inextricable from the evolution of the British Civil Service. Gladstone is certainly one, and others will occur later. It is a general truth that, with his or her position as First Lord of the Treasury and, more recently, Minister for the Civil Service, the Prime Minister of the day, of *any* day, has an unparalleled opportunity, if they wish, to reshape the system of which they are the political head.

Harold Wilson, Labour Opposition Leader in his speech to the Scarborough Conference in September 1964:

We are restating our Socialism in terms of the scientific revolution...The Britain that is going to be forged in the white heat of this revolution will be no place for restrictive practices....At the very time when even the MCC has abolished the distinction between amateurs and professionals, in science and industry, we are content to remain a nation of Gentlemen in a world of Players...<sup>16</sup>

It is probably impossible to convey to those who are not familiar with the old British class system and the role of cricket in English society the full significance, and emotional charge of these phrases. Wilson was from the north of England, a grammar-school boy, but also an Oxford academic, opposed politically to the aristocratic Lord Home, the Conservative Prime Minister. When he became Prime Minister in October 1964 he very soon appointed a Commission to look into the Civil Service, chaired by Lord Fulton, which reported in June 1968.<sup>17</sup>

The key sentences of diagnosis were as follows

The Home Civil Service today is still fundamentally the product of the nineteenth-century philosophy of the Northcote-Trevelyan report. The tasks it faces are those of the second half of the twentieth century. This is what we have found; it is what we seek to remedy...(para 1)  
(It) concentrated on the graduates who thereafter came to form the top of each service... took much less notice of the rest...(para 4)  
To meet the new tasks of government the modern Civil Service must be able to handle the social, economic, scientific and technical problems of our time in an international setting...It is inadequate in six main respects...(para 14)  
First, the Service is still essentially based on the philosophy of the amateur (or “generalist” or “all-rounder”). This is most evident in the Administrative Class which holds the dominant position in the Service.(para 15)

This was turning the arguments of Bridges judiciously and quite deliberately on their head. He had argued for the breadth and generalism of experience of the Administrator as his chief virtue; Fulton defined it as “amateur”. The word contained exactly as much emotional charge there as it had in the speech by Mr Wilson at Scarborough, and it also threatened those at the top of the Civil Service Class system in exactly the same way. Implicitly, it suggested that those at the top were amateur and the only true professionals were the despised “specialists” of which Northcote-Trevelyan had said little and which Bridges had only mentioned in passing (“I have no time to include in my picture the large and important professional and technical staffs who pursue their own specialised duties”).

In other words the Fulton report did not challenge the main model of examination-based merit but suggested that the Administrative Class should sharpen up its act and its language and style and that the specialists in the Civil Service should be granted what is often called “parity of esteem”. These were people who had not entered via the main examinations but had been appointed after interview, with a board always including a representative of the Civil Service Commission, and who had the technical

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<sup>16</sup> Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson*, 1992, p.304. The MCC is the Marylebone Cricket Club, the most senior body in English cricket and a most exclusive club, which for many years distinguished between those cricketers who played for love of the game and were unpaid amateurs - “Gentlemen” - and those, often from the north of England and rarely ‘university men’, who played for money, for a living - “Players”.

<sup>17</sup> Fulton report, Cmnd 3638, June 1968, Volume I.

expertise that general examinations in the Northcote-Trevelyan mould would not distinguish. Economists, planners, statisticians, research officers, accountants, lawyers and scientists all came within this heading. They had been definitively “below the salt” in the past, and Fulton aimed to lift them up.

Its recommendations included

- the creation of a Civil Service Department to run the Civil Service (not only a job for the Treasury)
- its head to be designated Head of the Civil Service
- the abolition of all Classes and replacement by a unified grading structure for all
- the creation of a Civil Service College.

As always, any Report is only significant descriptively insofar as it sets out how things are and how they could be, but it has meaning practically if it changes the way the institution - which is what the British Civil Service had become by 1968 - conducts its affairs. Fulton led, as Northcote-Trevelyan had, to immense controversy, exactly because it challenged the existing model. It attempted to use the language of professionalism against those who most proudly claimed to be professionals in the field of public administration. A contest ensued which was in the end resolved by the respective practical skills of the participants on various sides of the debate.

A change in machinery of government is always the simplest thing for a Prime Minister wishing to bring about change to engineer. The Civil Service Department was set up in November 1968. The system of unified grading was more gradually introduced. A Civil Service College was established in June 1970.

CSD, as it soon came to be known, was initially headed by the dynamic Sir William Armstrong and its original 900 staff were transferred directly from the old Pay and Management Group of Her Majesty's Treasury.<sup>18</sup> Armstrong, whose later career had an Icarian eminence, understood that his job was not to run the whole Civil Service - as he said, it was a federation of departments employing between them half a million - 500,000 - civil servants but his job was:

First, to manage the Civil Service - i.e. to keep it running as a going concern  
Second, to carry out a programme of reforming the Civil Service, with the object of improving its efficiency, and its humanity...

To give an instance, and to demonstrate his grasp of the new language appropriate for a senior official who was politically sensitive, he described the staff of the new Department. His lecture delivered in May 1970 ended as follows

...we have had nearly a hundred new entrants...we now have 25 scientists, 13 engineers, 3 economists, 6 accountants and auditors as well as many others. At the same time we have brought in 23 people from outside the Civil Service altogether, including 8 from universities and 10 from private industry, including 5 from management consultants. In this way we are hoping to match our new tasks with new men.

Sir Edward Bridges would have recognised what Armstrong was doing here. These carefully enumerated staff were clearly Players and not Gentlemen.

As it turned out, the CSD was not a great success, and it lasted only 13 years. Its head did not command a large enough staff to carry weight with the colleagues of Whitehall, or to persuade the Treasury, and it depended crucially upon the support of the Prime Minister. After 18 June 1970, the holder of that office changed when Edward Heath became head of a new Conservative government. But much of the Fulton programme rolled on.

The Civil Service College, for example, recommended by Fulton and set up by Sir William Armstrong in the CSD, actually came into existence under the Heath government in June 1970, with the invitations to Mr Wilson being altered at the last minute for the new Prime Minister. The author of this paper works at this institution, it has survived to spring 1997. It will be returned to later.

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<sup>18</sup> See “The Civil Service Department and its Tasks”, in Chapman, *op cit.*, p. 318.



The abolition of classes and the system of “unified grading” came in very gradually. When it was almost fully in place the service contained a grading system in which all civil servants could be graded, to ensure simplicity, comparability and fairness, across the whole of Whitehall.<sup>19</sup>

<b>Title</b>	<b>Grade Number</b>
Permanent Secretary	Grade 1
Second Permanent Secretary	Grade 1A
Deputy Secretary	Grade 2
Under Secretary	Grade 3
Director etc	Grade 4
Assistant Secretary	Grade 5
Senior Principal	Grade 6
Principal	Grade 7
Senior Executive Officer	-
Higher Executive Officer	-
Executive Officer	-
Administrative Officer	-
Administrative Assistant	-

The post-Fulton Civil Service had to some degree, therefore, been shaped by the Class and competence concerns of the Wilson premiership. The Administrative Class no longer existed as such. It would be possible for anyone, administrator, executive or specialist to proceed, in principle, up the unified grading system instead of their hitting a ceiling at a certain level well below the top<sup>20</sup>.

Under the Conservative administration from 1970 to 1974 the agenda did not change dramatically. Much of the energy of the government between June 1970 and February 1974 was taken up with, on the one hand, negotiating entry into the EEC (which happened in 1973) and, on the other, dealing with the oil crisis of 1973-4 and, in the United Kingdom, the associated coal-miners’ strike and the attempt to control wages from the centre. Mr Heath, himself once a Civil Servant - one of his officials commented that he would have made a first-rate Permanent Secretary - promised a revolution in government and produced, most unusually, a White Paper on the *Reorganisation of Central Government*<sup>21</sup> soon after he came into power.

There were some radical innovations; Programme Analysis and Review,<sup>22</sup> a new Central Policy Review Staff or “Think-tank”, headed by Lord Rothschild, the creation of large unified departments in the Departments of the Environment and Trade and Industry, but this administration did not fundamentally challenge or threaten the system which was still living through the consequences of the Fulton Report.

The same is true for the Wilson-Callaghan<sup>23</sup> Labour government elected in February 1974, which remained in power until 1979. The Labour government maintained the Central Policy Review Staff, and of course the CSD continued. There was a lengthy review of the Civil Service by a Select Committee of the House of Commons; its main concern was to discuss whether the role of Head of the Civil Service should continue to be held by the head of the CSD or that of the Treasury, by one person or two.

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<sup>19</sup> The titles as shown came fully into use in around 1985 and ceased to be fully correct in 1996. For many years the job titles carrying the word “Administrative” carried instead the older “Clerical”. The Grade 4 had no “standard” title attached. The unified grades never reached below Grade 7. The above table shows the titles used in the main administrative grades.

<sup>20</sup> This system determined three things - an official’s salary (moving up by increments to the top of the scale for that grade), their place in the hierarchy (their boss was above them, their staff below, and annual reports on them were to be completed by their senior) and the shape of their careers. In general you hoped to begin at the bottom and you could, without examination but with the passing of promotion boards, move in theory from AO to Grade 1. This did, in one case, happen.

<sup>21</sup> *Reorganisation of Central Government*, Cmnd 4506, October 1970

<sup>22</sup> Discussed in Hennessy, *op cit.*, p.237

<sup>23</sup> Harold Wilson became PM as a result of the election held on 28 February 1974, and won the 10 October 1974 general election. He served as PM until 6 April 1976 when he was succeeded by James Callaghan.

Attention focused on many things between 1974 and 1979 - the first-ever national referendum on British membership of the EEC, referendums on Scotland and Wales, pay crises and the IMF problems of the 1970s. During this period the Civil Service grew to its largest size since 1945, reaching 750,000 (industrial and non-industrial) in 1975.

However there were three straws in the wind that might have indicated a coming change of weather. The first was the announcement by Anthony Crosland on 9 May, 1975 that, as far as spending in local government was concerned “the party’s over!” He was the Secretary of State in the Department of the Environment, a super-ministry created by Mr Heath to incorporate local government, planning, transport and environmental matters. It sat in Marsham Street near Smith Square and tried to control what local councillors across the country wished to spend. Hit by, for the first time, a really severe need to cut back on public spending, Crosland’s speech was seen at the time as simply an attempt to look at local government. But in retrospect it seems to have an even wider significance.

The second was more clearly related to the Civil Service. In 1978 Leslie Chapman published *Your Disobedient Servant*<sup>24</sup>. He described how, as one of them from 1939, when he joined as a junior executive officer (not Administrative Class) until 1974 he

sought, in a variety of ways, to reduce waste and extravagance...My subject is the very limited one of waste in government service and especially in the Civil Service.<sup>25</sup>

Chapman was very well aware of the problems involved and of the likely Civil Service response to criticism

...first dead silence...By tomorrow the newspaper or the politician will fix their attention elsewhere...Second, courageous silence...only because the full story cannot be told is the criticism left unchallenged....Third, ‘we are not perfect, but we are willing to learn’ ...this requires a relaxed approach...is suitable for television or radio interviews... These methods have enabled the Civil Service, in the past, to shrug off most attempts to change it...<sup>26</sup>

Chapman had an extraordinary story to tell of inefficiency and the waste of tax-payers’ money because of what he saw as the poor management of his colleagues, and of his unavailing attempt to get anything done through the system. A public image of incompetence was established by this widely-serialised book. Leslie Chapman advised Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative leader, in the run-up to the 1979 general election.

What was to have even more impact in terms of public and politicians’ attitudes was the BBC television series “*Yes, Minister*” that took to the air in 1980<sup>27</sup>, but which emerged from the 1970s perceptions of the Civil Service. In fact its title took its origins very precisely from the *Diaries*, published in 1975, of Richard Crossman, who, describing his first week in office as Minister of Housing and Local Government in October 1964, in Harold Wilson’s new Labour Government wrote<sup>28</sup>

My Minister’s room is like a padded cell...Of course they don’t behave quite like nurses, because the Civil Service is profoundly deferential - ‘Yes, Minister! No, Minister! If you wish it Minister!’ -and combined with this there is a constant preoccupation to ensure that the Minister does what is correct...one has only to do absolutely nothing whatsoever to be floated forward on the stream...

This image, personal in the case of Crossman but turned into art by the scriptwriters of *Yes Minister*, however unfair, was that of a manipulative and outwardly-deferential but inwardly-superior class of supercilious Civil Servants, the pure type of Northcote-Trevelyan official spoiled by one hundred years of precedent and pride. It entered deeply into the mental equipment of the political circles. “Sir Humphrey Appleby”, the mandarin Permanent Secretary of the “Department of Administrative Affairs”,

<sup>24</sup> Leslie Chapman, *Your Disobedient Servant*, Penguin Books, 1979

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p.13

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, p.15-16

<sup>27</sup> First broadcast Monday 25 February 1980.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Crossman, *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, Volume 1, Hamish Hamilton, 1975, p.21. Diary entry for 22 October 1964.

knew exactly how to deal with Ministers, and “Jim Hacker”, the new Minister, was, at least in the earlier episodes, comprehensively outmanoeuvred by Appleby and, in between them, his Private Secretary, Bernard Woolley. This was only entertainment, but it expressed the mood of the time.

Some observers argued that a deeply complacent class of mandarins, having dealt with the Fulton reforms<sup>29</sup>, confronted by Ministers who for most of the 1970s had small or no Parliamentary majorities, had been able to get on with what Peter Hennessy has referred to as “the orderly management of decline” without politicians interfering too much into their domain. They had not needed management skills, since good administration was enough. Although concerned about taxpayers’ money, they seemed to possess inadequate means to measure its proper use. Government belonged to them. The various departments felt that they had learned by experience how to run a mixed economy, and that the structures of the state were set. Such were the perceptions. Then came 1979.

## **5. THE FIRST STEPS**

The 18 years since 1979 have seen a whirlwind of change in the British Civil Service. In many ways they have been a continuation of the reform agendas that were introduced by Northcote-Trevelyan and Fulton; as well as of the continuity processes that Bridges described as inherent in the situation of the British Civil Service. Margaret Thatcher, who became (Conservative) Prime Minister on 4 May 1979 placed her stamp upon the Civil Service. She did so in a way that no other Prime Minister so far, even possibly including Gladstone, has done. As he had many years, not only as Prime Minister but as Chancellor of the Exchequer - with its real power over the personnel and budgets of government - so she had 11 years in 10 Downing Street, winning the election of 1979 and then those of June 1983 and June 1987 before her resignation in November 1990, all the time as Minister for the Civil Service. Thus sheer longevity is an important explanation for the impact her government made. Another must be the strength of the doctrine and its resonance for the conduct of public affairs; the doctrine that bears her name and that has as its main elements the following:

- rolling back the state
- providing value-for-money for taxpayers
- getting a grip on public spending
- privatisation
- learning from best private-sector experience
- introducing management and efficiency into government.

It is also not banal to point out that she was a woman from a relatively humble background. She was armed by a science degree from Oxford and not lacking in self-belief after her defeat of Mr Heath for the leadership of her party and then of Mr Callaghan for the leadership of her country. Intellectual self-confidence was underpinned by the group of advisers that worked with her before the party came into office, including the then Sir Keith Joseph, Ralph Harris and Arthur Seldon at the Centre for Policy Studies and the Institute for Economic Affairs. Margaret Thatcher did not buy into any of the club-like assumptions about Whitehall and its government. This was why, as Hugh Stephenson put it<sup>30</sup>

The arrival of Margaret Thatcher’s government in the corridors of Whitehall in May 1979 was the biggest jolt that the Civil Service had experienced in living memory. For a while the whole Whitehall system almost visibly juddered...It was a culture shock. The elite administrative grade of the Civil Service in Whitehall has come to think of itself as the guardian and trustee of national continuity...The Prime Minister and a small group of sympathetic ministers...were arguing that its ideas and advice had proved bankrupt, that now was the time for an entirely new approach...

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<sup>29</sup> In *The Civil Servants, An Enquiry into Britain’s Ruling Class*, Macdonald, 1980, by Peter Kellner and Lord Crowther-Hunt (the latter a member of the Fulton Committee) one of the chapters is headed “The Lost Reforms” and another “How Armstrong Defeated Fulton”.

<sup>30</sup> Hugh Stephenson, *Mrs Thatcher’s First Year*, Jill Norman, 1980, pp. 29-30.

However, the Whitehall system was able to absorb the changes at the very top, with the staff of the Prime Minister in Number 10 continuing to serve her as they had served her predecessor. Sir Kenneth Stowe as her Principal Private Secretary managed a smooth take-over and Sir Clive Whitmore similarly, while Sir Robert Armstrong, the new Secretary to the Cabinet, effortlessly took on the role as her most senior closest official adviser. The role of Head of the Civil Service, which had been designed by Fulton to be held by the head of the CSD was held by Sir Ian Bancroft. It was to him that the task of “de-privileging” the Civil Service was given, together with that of controlling Civil Service pay and pensions. But in doing this task the Prime Minister’s Policy Unit, an organisation established by Harold Wilson, but now headed by Sir John Hoskyns and close to Margaret Thatcher was looking closely over his shoulder.

One of the ways that the government of Margaret Thatcher impacted upon the system was by the creation of small dynamic teams, “hit-squads”, tasked with particular areas of competence and reporting directly to the Prime Minister. Hoskyns and Norman Strauss were one of these in the Policy Unit. Another was set up under Derek Rayner, of Marks and Spencer, (“a firm she admires and uses” as it was said<sup>31</sup>) who was given an office in 70 Whitehall, the Cabinet Office, a small staff, run by Clive Priestley, and the title of the Prime Minister’s Adviser on Efficiency. They instituted a system of “Efficiency Scrutiny” of major departments and programmes, run by small teams known as “Rayner’s raiders”. The purpose of the Scrutinies, as he put it was<sup>32</sup>

action, not study. It is therefore (a) to examine a specific policy, activity or function with a view to savings or increased effectiveness and to questioning all aspects of the work normally taken for granted; (b) to propose solutions to any problems identified; and (c) to implement agreed solutions, or begin their implementation, within 12 months of the start of the scrutiny...

It was the radical asking of questions that was of most significance. Does this activity need to be done at all? Being one of the hardest questions to answer, the question “why?” caused Whitehall officialdom immense difficulties, as it was intended to. The enthusiastic, young, high-flying officials put in charge of the scrutinies were protected by Rayner and he by the Prime Minister from any damage to their career prospects. Hennessy quotes one youngish Civil Servant<sup>33</sup>

It was exhilarating...you knew you had an opportunity to show that the Civil Service could improve itself...you were asked to apply your own judgement to a situation. You were asked to look at a topic. You were asked to write a report. It would have your name on it. It would go in front of the Minister with your name on it...

By the time he left the Efficiency Unit in late 1982 130 scrutinies had produced savings of £170 million and of 16,000 posts per annum, and the Head of the Civil Service Sir Robert Armstrong affirmed that the main message taught to the service by Lord Rayner was that “they must never become complacent about the functions within their control”.<sup>34</sup>

The Efficiency Unit passed into the hands of Sir Robin Ibbs of ICI in 1983, and it was given a new task. It had become part of the structure of Whitehall itself. But before we look at that new task it is necessary to deal with another element of the anti-complacency drive of the early years of Margaret Thatcher’s government, namely the “FMI” (Financial Management Initiative). First introduced into the consciousness of the Civil Service by a video, which was in itself deliberately revolutionary, the FMI, as was explained by Richard Wilding of Her Majesty’s Treasury, had been launched by the Prime Minister in May 1982 (during the Falklands Conflict). Its aim was to promote in all Departments an organisation and a system in which managers at all levels have

- (a) a clear view of their objectives and of their performance in relation to them
- (b) well defined responsibility for the value-for-money provided by their resources

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<sup>31</sup> Hennessy, *Whitehall*, p.592

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, p. 596

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, p.597

<sup>34</sup> Robert Armstrong, *Management in the Civil Service*, Chartered Building Societies Institute, September 1985.

(c) information and advice about exercising their responsibilities.<sup>35</sup>

What was new was the emphasis on staff owning their activities and all the costs and implications that flowed from them. Costs mattered as much as results; they fell to you and your “cost-centre”. The latter term was quite new in 1982. Wilding did indicate that it was difficult to apply the language of objectives and “vfm” (value for money) to areas of policy/advisory work, and suggested that common sense would be necessary there, but for all that, this was a kind of revolution. FMI became part of the operating style of the British Civil Service and has remained. The language of “objectives” and “performance indicators” has been well learned. As has the key FMI question “where is the money going and what are we getting for it?”

In some Departments, especially the Department of the Environment, Ministers introduced sophisticated information systems to enable them and “senior managers” to evaluate the effectiveness of their programmes. The MINIS system at DOE - “a kind of bureaucratic Domesday Book”<sup>36</sup> introduced under a Secretary of State, Michael Heseltine, with an interest in management techniques became a standard for many others to follow.

There was one final piece of unfinished business that the government of Margaret Thatcher dealt with in the first phase of reforms. While Whitehall was digesting the effects of “Raynerism” and of the FMI the Civil Service Department, one of the remaining Fulton creations, was found by the Prime Minister to be unnecessary. Its head, Sir Ian Bancroft, resigned and in late 1981 the Department was abolished, its staff split between the Treasury and a new MPO or Management and Personnel Office. The Headship of the Civil Service, that Sir Ian had held was now shared between Sir Robert Armstrong and Sir Douglas Wass<sup>37</sup>.

In 1985, Sir Douglas having retired, the new and by now undisputed Head, Sir Robert, produced his equivalent of the Bridges Rede lecture, this time to the Building Societies Institute. It was called “Management in the Civil Service” and made the important point that numbers in the service had fallen dramatically, as a result of the different reforms, and largely by “natural wastage” - very few people had been made redundant compulsorily. The figure had fallen by 115,000 over five years. But his whole tone was different from Bridges

The Civil Service has always set much store on maintaining good relations with the public we serve and in providing good value for money...Today our approach is becoming even more professional and commercial... Management in Government, as in business, is responsible for achieving results through people, getting jobs done to an acceptable standard within given timescales and the resources available...<sup>38</sup>

The period from 1982 up to 1987 was dominated in Civil Service terms by the work of the new MPO, headed by Miss (later Dame) Anne Mueller. A “Top Management Programme” was introduced, in order to train Grade 3 officials, the under-secretaries - who might have spent all their careers in policy work - as managers. This brought together, on a concentrated course, participants from the Civil Service and from industry. The emphasis in the time of Fulton had been on civil servants learning new social science skills -economics etc - now it was management skills per se that were being taught, and preferably either by business people themselves or by management consultants.

The word “Management” does not occur in the Northcote-Trevelyan report and it does not appear in Fulton until paragraph 8 on the second page. By 1985, as the quotation from Sir Robert shows, it was the key term and the key skill. The tide of management was coming in and ‘administration’ began a long retreat before it.

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Wilding, “The Need for Change and the Financial Management Initiative”, Summary of Video-tape. The FMI was officially set out in Cmnd 8616, *Efficiency and Effectiveness in the Civil Service*, 1982. The video was a talking head with a text held in front of the speaker, primitive by today’s standards, but it was a first nonetheless. It was circulated to all Departments and NDPBs.

<sup>36</sup> Hennessy, *op cit.*, p. 607. MINIS was a management information system for ministers.

<sup>37</sup> Sir Robert was Cabinet Secretary, Sir Douglas Permanent Secretary of the Treasury.

<sup>38</sup> Armstrong, *op cit.*

In the MPO there were many other smaller-scale programmes. A “Forms Unit” advised on improving the forms that the public had to complete to receive benefits or pay taxes. A “Consultancy Inspection and Review Unit” was able to focus expertise on areas of difficulty. A “Joint Management Unit” took the FMI forward. “Policy Evaluation” and “Multi-Departmental Reviews”, the “Central Unit of Purchasing”, the “Enterprise and Deregulation Unit”, all were programmes involving small numbers of staff (for example in July 1986 the Joint Management Unit had 4 staff, the CUP 11) but pushing forward the same set of connected ideas. Recruitment was still managed by the Civil Service Commission at Basingstoke - with 350 staff - still running the major examinations for staff at Executive Officer and above. In particular they recruited the “Fast Stream”, called *Administration Trainees*<sup>39</sup> and recruited at 22 or so with good degrees, given special training. Miss Anne Mueller herself, the head of the MPO, often spoke at training events for the new ATs and she used to point out to them that the service they had joined was undergoing a kind of revolution.

The government during the period of 1985-7 was racked by the Westland debates of early 1986, and the resignation of Mr Heseltine, and additionally by the debates about the Falklands conflict and the case surrounding Mr Clive Ponting. Following that, the Head of the Civil Service produced his memorandum on the duties and responsibilities of civil servants to Ministers on 25 February 1985 setting out that<sup>40</sup>

Civil servants are servants of the Crown. For all practical purposes the Crown in this context means and is represented by the Government of the day...the Civil Service as such has no constitutional personality or responsibility separate from the duly elected Government of the day.

It seems unlikely that the Armstrong memorandum, reminding officials of the permanent constraints on their position and of the unchanging nature of their role subordinate to democratically-elected Ministers, could be bettered as a statement of classic truth.<sup>41</sup> All the waves of reforms did not change the situation, however much they changed people’s attitudes towards what they thought it was.

It would hardly have been possible to imagine, in late 1987, with the retirement of Sir Robert Armstrong as head of the Civil Service that the changes introduced by the government of Margaret Thatcher had hardly started. But in retrospect the period 1979-1987 was one where the Conservative government had barely got into its stride in reforming the Civil Service. With a new occupant of the Headship, Sir Robin Butler, and the re-election of the Conservative government for the second time in June 1987, the process began to accelerate.

## **6. NEXT STEPS**

The above title does not appear in the memorandum from the Prime Minister’s Private Secretary that set under way probably the biggest Civil Service reform programme of the Margaret Thatcher governments. The note was sent to Sir Robin Ibbs, who had taken over as head of the Efficiency Unit from Sir Derek Rayner in 1983 and it asked him, under the title *Improving Management in the Civil Service* not only to monitor what had been achieved but what could be done next:

The Prime Minister recognises that great strides have been made in improving management in the Civil Service during the last few years...now she sees the need as being to build on what has been achieved and maintain and where possible accelerate the momentum of improvement.  
She would like the Efficiency Unit to carry out a scrutiny...talk to a number of Ministers and Permanent Secretaries, as well as to other managers...  
The Prime Minister would be grateful if you could supervise this scrutiny and report to her on its findings by February 1987.

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<sup>39</sup> There was lengthy discussion in the 1980s and 1990s as to the appropriateness of this title, and “Policy Management Trainee” at times suggested.

<sup>40</sup> Cited in *Civil Servants and Ministers : Duties and Responsibilities*, Cmnd 9841, July 1986

<sup>41</sup> It has now been superseded by the Civil Service Code, see *Guidance on Guidance*, 1996, p.31.

The report<sup>42</sup> that summarised the findings of the small team that carried out (between 3 November 1986 and 20 March 1987, or 90 working days) this most significant of all scrutinies was published in February 1988, by which time Sir Robin Butler was the new Head of the Civil Service. Although it is always referred to as the “Ibbs Report”, his name does not appear, and instead those of Kate Jenkins, Karen Caines and Andrew Jackson do. The two words that were picked out were Next Steps (as implied in the Prime Minister’s reference to great strides) and it was under this generic title that this initiative took flight.

They made seven points of diagnosis:

1. 95% of the civil service are delivering services; they generally welcome the management changes to date
2. senior management is dominated by policy staff with little experience of service delivery
3. senior civil servants are ruled by ministerial and parliamentary pressures
4. Ministers are overloaded and inexperienced in management
5. Departments still focus upon activities and not on results
6. there are insufficient pressures to improve performance
7. “the Civil Service is too big and diverse to manage as a single entity”.

and recommended:

- “agencies should be established to carry out the executive functions of government within a policy and resources framework set by a Department”
- “a full Permanent Secretary should be designated a ‘Project manager’ to ensure that the change takes place”
- “there should be clearly defined responsibilities between the Secretary of State and the Permanent Secretary on the one hand and the Chief Executive of the agency on the other”.

During 1987 the Civil Service worked to prepare a number of candidates to become the first agencies and to identify the people that would run the programme. All was revealed in the Statement to the House made by the Prime Minister on 18 February 1988<sup>43</sup>. She stated that there would be established executive agencies, headed by a Chief Executive, accountable to a Minister, generally remaining in the Civil Service. They would run the “executive functions of government. As distinct from policy advice...”

Her statement also stressed that there would be a continuing programme of establishing agencies, rather than a ‘big bang’ approach, and that to replace the MPO a new “Office of the Minister for the Civil Service” (OMCS) would be established. He was not named in the statement, but soon after Peter Kemp, a Treasury official, was named as a new Second Permanent Secretary, head of the OMCS and the Next Steps Project Manager.

Peter Kemp was not an Administrative Class civil servant in any sense, having joined as a direct-entrant principal, never having attended a university, and from an accountancy background. For an elevated official like a Permanent Secretary to consent to use the title of “Project Manager” was unorthodox. If one of the aims of the original Next Steps report was, as they said in paragraph 50 “the release of managerial energy” then the following account by Diana Goldsworthy, one of his team, confirms that it happened<sup>44</sup>

The Project Manager had a very small team - initially only three people - to help him. There was a feeling of excitement and comradeship among those who were setting up the initial agencies. They believed, as one Chief Executive later described it, that in turning the Next Steps ideas into reality they were genuinely breaking new ground.

The first candidates for Agency Status were varied, ranging from the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, with 65 staff, to the Employment Service, with 35,600 staff. Peter Kemp very early on, in his evidence to the Treasury and Civil Service Select committee of the House of Commons in May 1988<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Efficiency Unit, *Improving Management in Government : the Next Steps*, HMSO, February 1988.

<sup>43</sup> See Diana Goldsworthy, *Setting up Next Steps*, HMSO, May 1991, p.16 for the text.

<sup>44</sup> Goldsworthy, *op cit.*, p. 21

<sup>45</sup> Evidence given on 18 May 1988. *Eighth Report of the Treasury and Civil Service Committee*, Session 1987-8, 25 July 1988.

stated that it was his ambition that 75% of the entire Civil Service should be working in agencies within ten years, in other words by the year 1998. While the setting up of agencies was only an indicator of the programme rather than its *raison d'être*, it was undoubtedly important that there should be some successful launches of the new agencies quickly. By July 1988 there were 29 candidates for agency status, across most Departments of Whitehall and on 1 August 1988 the first Agency was launched, the Vehicle Inspectorate of the Department of Transport, with Ron Oliver as the first-ever Chief Executive.

The Project Team rigorously went through a series of steps to determine whether an activity could be turned into an agency<sup>46</sup>.

1. Does the work need to be done at all?
2. Could it be done in the private sector?
3. Could it be done by the private sector under contract?
4. If it is to be done in government, can it be separated out from policy problems?
5. Is there already a degree of autonomy?

If the answer suggested an agency was viable, then the team would start to develop the Framework Document that defines the relationship between Departments and their agencies. At a later point, an Agency Chief Executive - ACE - would be selected and appointed.

The role of Chief Executive held new challenges for those appointed. The traditional facelessness was no longer possible, and over time a number have achieved public fame or notoriety. Where there have been difficulties in their role, as with Mr Derek Lewis at the Prisons Service it has often been precisely because of the dilemmas involved in the overlap between “policy” and “execution”. At the time of writing all such posts are normally opened up for competition, and most are now on fixed-term contract. There is some evidence that people who become Chief Executives are more “professional” in the Fulton sense and less generalist in their backgrounds than those who achieve other senior levels in the rest of the Civil Service.

As at March 1997 - there were 130 agencies employing 313,323 staff and a total of 386,473 working on Next Steps lines. To quote the latest Next Steps Team publication, “Some 74% of the total of those working in the Home Civil Service currently work in agencies”<sup>47</sup>. One can say with certainty that by the summer of 1997 Peter Kemp’s prediction of 75% will have been met, one year early.

The executive agencies vary enormously in scale, from the Social Security Benefits Agency, with 74,925 staff to Wilton Park of the Foreign Office, with 35. A list from say “F” to “I” would cover

<i>Fire Service College</i>	<i>Government Purchasing Agency</i>	<i>HM Land Registry</i>
<i>Forensic Science Agency NI</i>	<i>Health Estates</i>	<i>HM Prison Service</i>
<i>Forensic Science Service</i>	<i>Highways Agency</i>	<i>Industrial Research Unit</i>
<i>Forest Enterprise</i>	<i>Historic Royal Palaces</i>	<i>Insolvency Service</i>
<i>Government Property Lawyers</i>	<i>Historic Scotland</i>	<i>Intervention Board</i>

Another 27 organisations were in March 1997 Agency candidates.<sup>48</sup>

The political response to Next Steps has always been positive and Mr Major’s government has pursued it with equal vigour. The relevant Parliamentary select committee now views it as “transferable technology” which any government will wish to adopt<sup>49</sup>. This is important since all select committees represent a bipartisan approach, from MPs of all political parties.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, p.25. These were later described as the “Prior Options” steps and to be repeated whenever the future of an agency was being reviewed.

<sup>47</sup> Next Steps Briefing Note, March, 1997

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, p.46

<sup>49</sup> Treasury and Civil Service Committee, 5<sup>th</sup> report, House of Commons 1993-4. “Next Steps Agencies represent a significant improvement in the organisation of Government and any future Government will want to maintain them in order to implement its objectives for the delivery of services to the public”



As a result of the continuing application of the "Prior Options" process, all agencies are due to be periodically reconsidered in terms of the original Next Steps questions, and a number, 16, have been either privatised (eg the Transport Research Laboratory and Her Majesty's Stationery Office) or abolished, as with the Resettlement Agency.

In spring 1997 Next Steps is still proceeding, almost ten years after it began, and it has a life of its own. Its original head, Sir Peter Kemp, retired in the summer of 1992. His project has now been almost completed.

What it has meant for the civil servants working in the agencies has certainly been a release of energies and enthusiasms, with greater identification developing with their agency rather than with an amorphous and distant department of state. It has, therefore, been largely a successful and effective reform, with some costs perhaps in the loss of a corporate sense of the Civil Service. Ministers, and the House of Commons have not always found it practicable to distinguish the areas of execution from those of policy, and the skills needed to handle that interface remain classically those of the policy civil servant rather than a 1980s-style businessman or a 1960s-style professional. And it is arguable that Next Steps has recreated the distinction between mechanical (=executive agency) and intellectual (=central core departments and policy) work that underpinned Northcote-Trevelyan and was one of the things Fulton objected to. The Civil Service College, which was one of the first ten agencies created, has from the personal experience of the author, been immensely liberated - if never entirely freed - from the restraints of Cabinet Office control, while at the same time its presence within government has enabled it to play an active role in all the changes described here.

Margaret Thatcher left office in November 1990. The initiatives described in this part of the paper were still, and most are still continuing. She was succeeded by John Major, whose Prime Ministership requires a section on its own.

## **7. FOUR C'S : CITIZEN'S CHARTER , CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**

It is not always the case that the most recent events are the most significant, even though they may bulk larger in our memory than more distant ones. There is therefore a need to be more selective about the many initiatives and reforms of the 1990s, and this paper shall concentrate on just two of the Civil Service reforms of recent years. There is regrettably not space to cover many others.<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps the most typical programme of the years since 1990 has been the *Citizen's Charter* launched by John Major in July 1991. Mr Major, brought up in Brixton, with a non-university background and as much outside the Whitehall club as his predecessor, regarded this as his own personal programme, aimed at least as much at local government, and the privatised utilities, as at the Civil Service. In his introduction to the first publication on the subject he wrote<sup>51</sup>

to make public services answer better to the wishes of their users, and to raise their quality overall, have been ambitions of mine ever since I was a local councillor in Lambeth over 20 years ago... I want the Citizen's Charter to be one of the central themes of public life in the 1990s...we will, for example, be introducing guaranteed maximum waiting times for hospital operations...

and in perhaps the most significant phrase he wrote

There is a well-spring of talent, energy, care and commitment in our public services. The aim of the Citizen's Charter is to release these qualities.

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<sup>50</sup> *Investors in People, Competing for Quality, the Private Finance Initiative, Open Government, Fundamental Expenditure Reviews, Training and Development White Paper* and *government direct* have been among the areas of continuing activity to May 1997.

<sup>51</sup> *The Citizen's Charter : Raising the Standard*, HMSO, July 1991, Cm 1599.

There is a very clear echo here of the Next Steps programme's desire to release energy, but Mr Major added care and commitment to the qualities that were needed. The Citizen's Charter has followed the precedent of previous reforms in being run by a small committed team at the centre relying heavily upon their support from the top of government. But it has not worked through making machinery of government changes; instead it has aimed at changing attitudes within a very clear framework of service delivery. The emphasis has been upon improving public servants' efforts to fulfil their *duties* rather than upon creating new *rights* for citizens.<sup>52</sup> In the original Citizen's Charter white paper the following principles of public service were laid down:

- standards - set., monitored and published so that users can know what they can reasonably expect
- openness - full, accurate information in plain language and clear indication of who is in charge, how services are run and how much they cost
- choice - wherever possible, and offering consultation with those who use services, whose views should be taken into account in final decisions on standards
- courtesy and helpfulness - services available equally to all and run for their customers and implying the wearing of name badges for officials that deal directly with the public
- putting things right - apologies for mistakes and clear complaints procedures
- value for money - efficient delivery of services within affordable resources and independent validation of performance against standards.

After having been in progress now for over six years, the Citizen's Charter programme has seen a whole series of different mechanisms put in place to deliver the basic principles. These have included Charters for most government Departments that deliver services directly. These will state what is to be delivered and what customers can expect. Some examples:<sup>53</sup>

Department	Charter
Health	Patient's Charter
Inland Revenue	Taxpayer's Charter
Contributions Agency	Contributor's Charter
Education	Parent's Charter
Employment Service	Jobseeker's Charter
Home Office	The Victim's Charter

There are now 41 published charters, including also many non-Civil Service activities. Organisations may apply for a Charter Mark Award, which is given to public services that demonstrate that they are providing an excellent service to the public. It is held for three years after which holders must re-apply. The first 36 awards were made in 1992; in December 1996, 323 Charter mark awards were made. At present around 90 of the Next Steps Agencies hold one of these awards. The Citizen's Charter Unit also publishes a free quarterly magazine. It is difficult to convey the flavour of the Citizen's Charter successes. They are very practical. Examples might include :

- \* *the Post Office delivers 91.9% of first class mail the day after posting*
- \* *United Kingdom Passport Agency average turn-round time now under 9 days*
- \* *Employment Service states that 98% of clients are seen within 10 minutes*
- \* *Hertfordshire County Council have now a 24-hour pothole repair service*
- \* *Benefits Agency, clearance times for Income Support Claims have reduced from 5 days to 3.5*

The Citizen's Charter has had less impact upon the machinery of government than many other reforms but it has changed the *mentality* and the language of government service-delivery.

It has also received the accolade of praise from the Public Services Committee of the House of Commons, who judged that it had made a valuable contribution to improving public services. The new Labour Government shares similar opinions of the value of public service.

In the course of the years 1994-5 the Office of Public Service, which is the current group at the centre of the Cabinet Office dealing with these matters, and which shares management of the civil service with

<sup>52</sup> The term "rights" is perhaps difficult here. In some areas the Charter arguably has created new rights - as in the Patient's Charter. But "service standard" is better.

<sup>53</sup> *Charters and how to obtain them*, Citizen's Charter Unit March 1997

the Treasury, published two reports that sum up and in a sense have stabilised (not stopped) the process of continuous change in the civil service. The titles of the two reports, over which top management in the OPS spent much time, were:<sup>54</sup>

*The Civil Service : Continuity and Change*  
*The Civil Service : Taking Forward Continuity and Change*

What is important about these texts is the recognition of the fact that the civil service has changed and will need to continue to change but that in part of its function there has been no change and there should be none, instead a continuity. The former is stated as follows<sup>55</sup>

it has carried through a wide range of reforms to improve its efficiency, effectiveness and quality of service to the public. New organisational structures and management techniques have been introduced...The Government recognises the commitment that departments, agencies and their staff at all levels have shown in bringing about these changes.

But

The Government, like its predecessors, is wholeheartedly committed to sustaining the key principles on which the British civil service is based: integrity, political impartiality, objectivity, selection and promotion on merit and accountability through Ministers to Parliament.

In the second report the next major changes are also set out. These included

- the establishment of a senior civil service - “a highly professional group of senior advisers and managers to work closely with Ministers” starting at the old Grade 5 level and employed on written but without-term contracts
- the First Civil Service Commissioner not to be a civil servant to reinforce the principle of selection on the basis of merit
- the promulgation of a new Civil Service Code to set out the framework and values required
- the ending of centrally-defined grades as from 1996.

These two reports have both reshaped the civil service and placed it in a position to evolve further. Pay and grading was delegated to departments and so by spring 1997 there were no more service-wide grades - apart from the new Senior Civil Service at old Grade 5 and above. Sir Michael Betts, from the private sector, became the new First Civil Service Commissioner. The Civil Service Commission, part of whose functions had been taken over by an Executive Agency - Recruitment and Assessment Services - saw those elements privatised in 1996, while the Commissioners, so core a part of the Northcote-Trevelyan settlement, have been retained and their position re-asserted. The Civil Service Code was published. At the time of writing the changes set in train are still working through.

All of the achievements from 1979 to 1997, and on, have been achieved with a civil service that, as the objective record of its size shows, has been growing ever smaller, down-sized, but with tasks as large or larger than before. It has had to deliver “more for less”; the hard motto stencilled on its briefcases and burned into its laptops.

## **8. CONCLUSIONS**

The United Kingdom Civil Service in spring and summer 1997 is still recognisably the product of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of the nineteenth century. But it is still also recognisably a service that Sir Edward Bridges would understand, one that the Fulton committee changed and not altogether unaffected by the work of Derek Rayner and Peter Kemp. If one could take a usage from the world of

<sup>54</sup> Cm 2627, London, HMSO, 1994 and Cm 2748, London, HMSO, 1995.

<sup>55</sup> Cm 2627, page 1, paragraphs 1.1 and 1.3.

the European Community, there are a certain number of *acquis britanniques* - six principles - which we can identify.

They are as follows:

1. Political *Neutrality*
2. Appointment and promotion on *Merit*
3. *Permanence* (in the sense that elections do not determine the holders of senior posts)
4. *Administrative* experience and *management* technique applied to the practical skill of *policy advice*
5. Awareness of *value for money* and *propriety* in its use
6. A sense of *public service* alongside the constitutional imperative of being *servants of the Crown*.

Each wave of reform has contributed to this evolved approach. Any further reforms can build upon a readiness to evolve further.

And what are the lessons for any new Government wishing to further reshape that service?

The complacency and slackness, the pride and prejudice, the waste and inefficiency that have all at various times been seen as vices have been largely eliminated by Liberal, Conservative and Labour governments. They have used three main techniques or models:

Model One: the “hit-squad” supported from the very top of government by the Prime Minister of the day tasked with limited objectives in defined time and led by outsiders but employing insiders who know how the system works, and resulting in small but cumulative action;

Model Two: the fundamental, longer-term and academically-grounded review by a commission able to give consensual, culturally-influential advice;

Model Three: the small team, containing political will and administrative skill, not bound to give direct practical output nor to agree its conclusions with a wide body of opinion but able to speak forcefully - as truth to power - of what the problem is and what is to be done about it.

Broadly speaking, these have been the successful techniques used respectively in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Conservative Governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major; in modern times by the Labour Government of Harold Wilson; and in Victorian times by the Liberal Government of W.E. Gladstone. Their purest examples are, in turn, the Next Steps Project Team, the Fulton Committee and the Northcote-Trevelyan Report.

Of them all, it is my view<sup>56</sup> that the work of Northcote-Trevelyan - Model Three - has been more influential than almost any other state paper produced anywhere in the western world, perhaps excluding only the work of Jean Monnet and Alexander Hamilton. It is because we still work in the world they defined, as evolved over 150 years by many thousands of civil servants and many hundreds of ministers and parliamentarians, that we can evolve and change further. The 21<sup>st</sup> century will call for new techniques of reform if we are to remain fit for business *and* fit for public service.

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## *Annex One*

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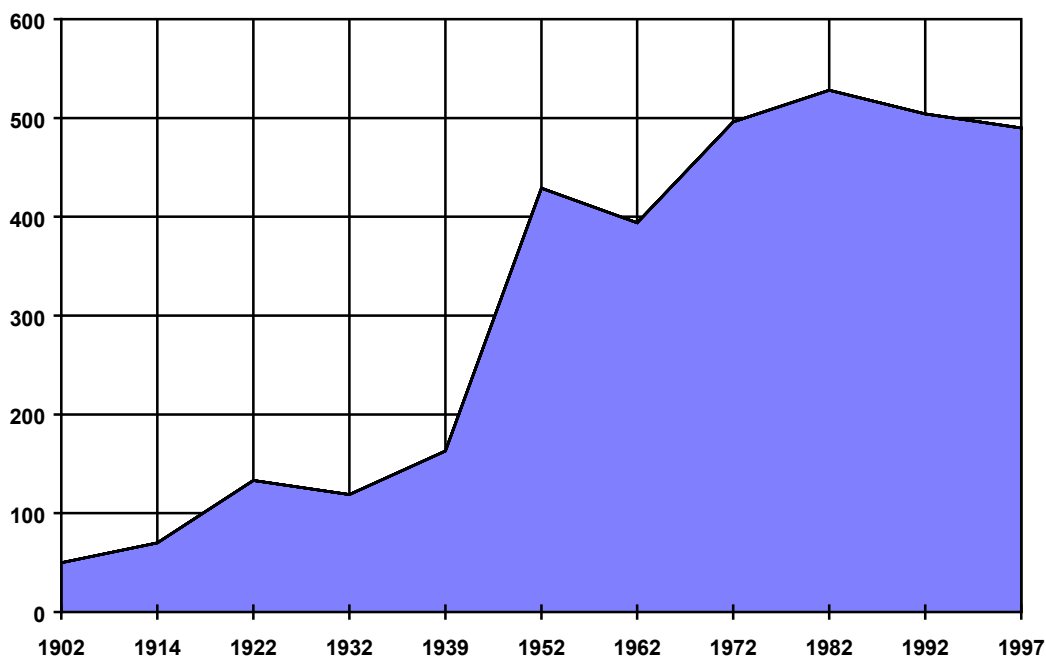
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***Annex Two***

**The Size of the British Civil Service**

*Thousands of Staff*



Note: the above figures are for “Non-Industrial” staff only.

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Source : Civil Service Statistics, 1993, 1997 (*London, HMSO*)