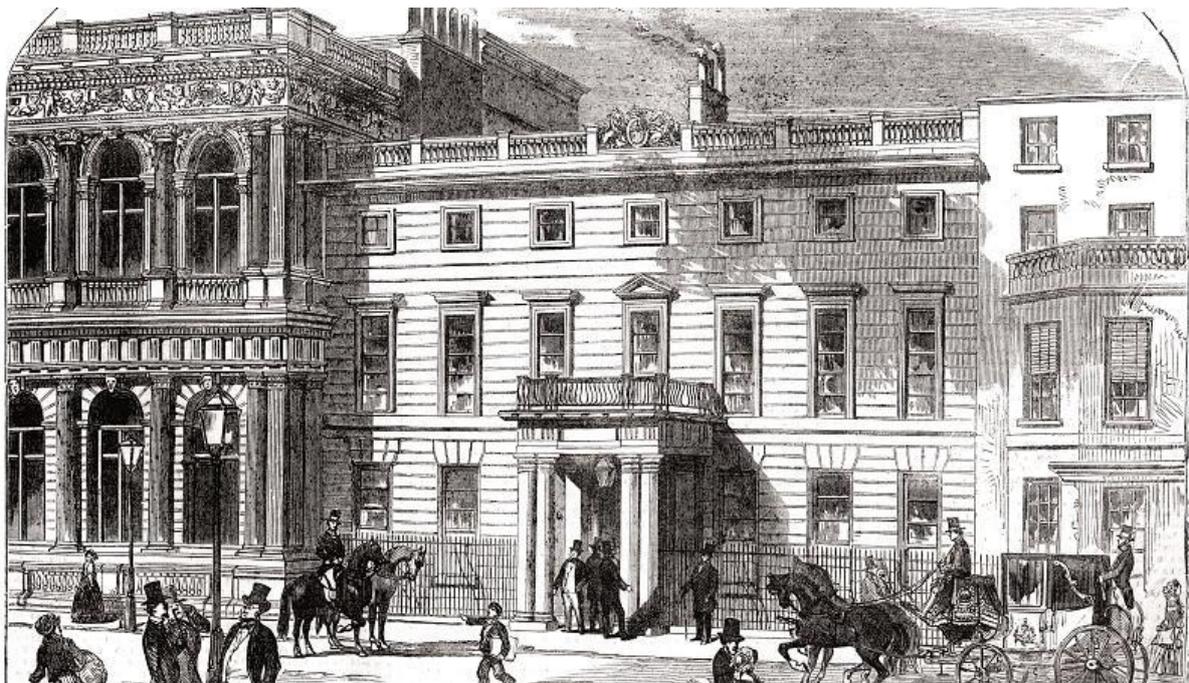


Testing times: a history of civil service exams

Written by Dr Richard Willis on 23 May 2019

Recruitment on merit is a core principle of the civil service, but it hasn't always been.

Dr Richard Willis takes a look at the introduction of civil service exams and how they have evolved over the years



The office of the War Department on Pall Mall, 1855. Photo: PA

Before the 1850s, according to famed Victorian reformers Stafford Northcote and Charles Trevelyan, employment in the civil service was “eagerly sought after” by “the unambitious, and the indolent or incapable”. In their 1854 report, these two senior officials (one of whom, Northcote, would later become chancellor) argued that the provision of sick pay and pensions made the service an attractive employer for sickly individuals, while the lazy sought refuge in a job “where their success depends upon their simply avoiding any flagrant misdeed and attending with moderate regularity to routine duties”.

Northcote and Trevelyan’s report aimed to change this, and helped to introduce the idea of using competitive testing to fill vacancies in the modern civil service. From those early years to the present, the challenge has been to create reforms that improve the performance of

civil servants and ensure that merit plays a far greater part in the recruitment process.

The Victorian reformers underlined the importance of civil servants offering a professional service. They wanted first to put an end to the recruitment of sickly administrators who could take advantage of the comparative ease of work and, secondly, to clamp down on ill health and absence where financial support was provided by the state. An essential aim was to put an end to the practice of patronage and instead hire healthy recruits of sound “general ability”.

The new ethos was to select by examination high achieving individuals who could meet all the requirements of the job. The exams – which were used for both junior and senior posts – covered the classics, history, law, political economy, modern languages and geography.

The new exams were not without their critics. Some argued that they would create a surplus of examined personnel and asserted that the English civil service would have to put up with the lethargy of the state of China or the evils of the “Prussian Democracy”.

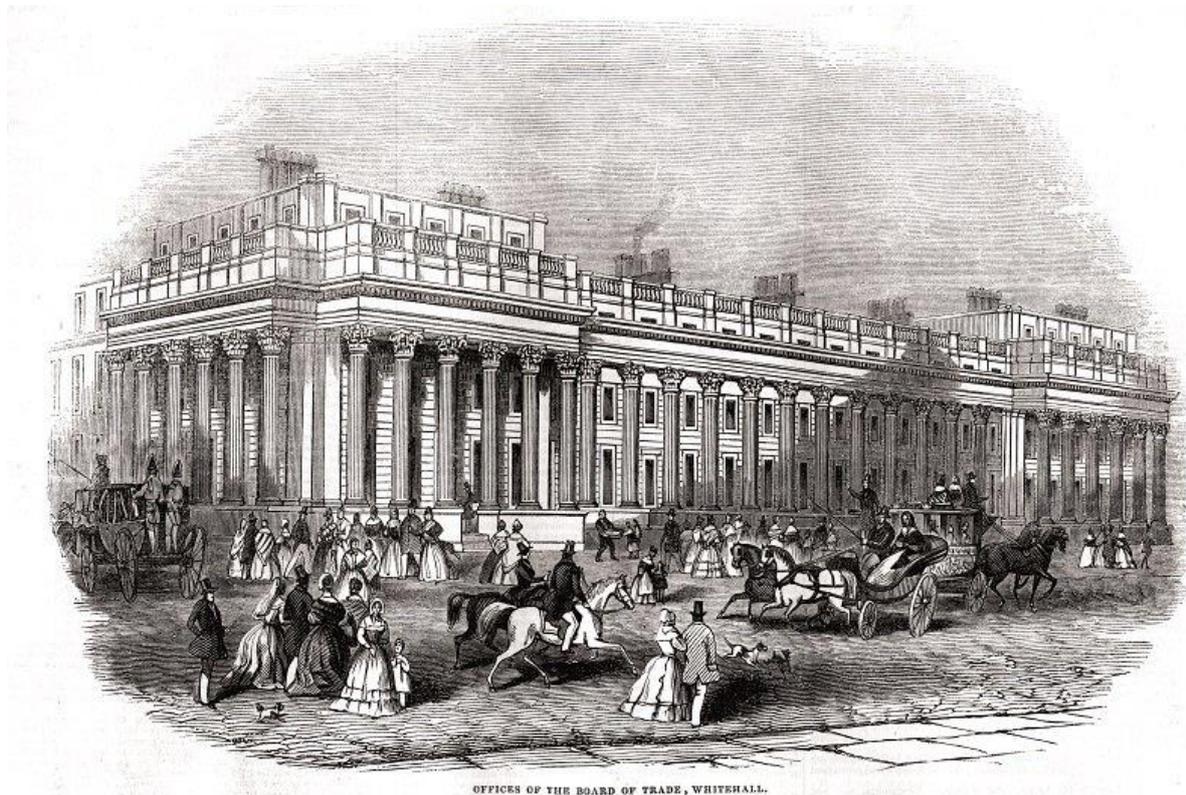
As to the exams themselves, they were criticised for encouraging “cramming” and for expecting only a superficial knowledge. On the other hand, the exam results showed that in many cases candidates had performed exceptionally well. A minority did in fact achieve excellent results, which was accompanied by a great “stimulus” to education, encouraging applicants to undertake considerable learning and study.

William Gladstone, as prime minister, and John Wood, chairman of the Inland Revenue Board, very much approved of the proposed reforms. Both men considered that the changes would have a very desirable effect on public recruitment and add value to the service sector in the economy. Wood pointed to some of the spin-offs that could also be achieved, such as an increase in salaries to attract the best candidates (pleas for higher pay in the civil service did not then always fall on deaf ears).

An Order-in-Council firmly sanctioned open competition on 4 June 1870. Soon it became clear that the combination of academic success, along with giving an improved service to the public, would attract highly qualified and able candidates.

The new competition in the 1870s benefitted public school and university candidates, yet the number of openings was limited. Even those who passed the examination were not guaranteed work. Special attention was therefore given to potential employees’ knowledge and fitness for office. The civil service meticulously checked the background of

applicants before appointing new recruits. Those in personnel examined health records to ensure the candidate was free from illness and through oral testing did their best to help guarantee that the successful applicants had the necessary knowledge and aptitude for the job.



As the years rolled on the nature of these exams did not change that much. There were exam centres in major cities including London, Edinburgh, Dublin, Liverpool and Leeds. An exam fee, of about £1, was requested from each entrant. Notice of the successful candidates and their appointments were publicised in the national press.

By 1907 the framework of the competitive test increasingly relied on how classics, history, mathematics and natural sciences were taught at Oxford and Cambridge. Entrants also began to concentrate on non-university disciplines, such as public administration, to prepare for the exams.

In 1929, a further Royal Commission on the Civil Service was set up to consider selection methods and pay. The commissioners agreed that entry should continue to be by open competition but objected to using oral exams to identify what were then referred to as “personality” traits. The commissioners also questioned the low salaries received by civil servants: of 300,000 employees, about half were paid less than £3 a week, an amount not really enough to make ends meet. Beyond any doubt, pay to civil servants was in need of reform.

The outbreak of the Second World War resulted in a temporary suspension of the exams, but they were soon resumed, for it was thought that too many school-leaving recruits had been forced into “blind alley” occupations.

Into the 1960s the civil service faced problems that were similar to those experienced in Victorian England, including an amateurish approach to administrative work. Management consultants, brought in to look at the way the service was run, concluded that there was a lack of skilled managers adhering to high standards of professional expertise. Prime minister Harold Wilson set up a committee chaired by John Fulton to come up with proposals for reform of the civil service.

The Fulton Committee welcomed the fact that the competitive element in exams did much to allow appointments on merit. The main weakness it identified was that it took too long for results to be released and, in some cases, prospective civil servants were snapped up by other employers who were able to respond more quickly with offers of employment. It also argued that subjects such as social studies and maths should take on more importance and classics should be demoted.

In 2002, among several reforms, there was evidence of greater leniency in the selection of higher-ranking candidates. No longer did non-sensitive posts always require the approval of the Civil Service Commission, the body responsible for recruitment. The rationale was to streamline some of the existing arrangements. Yet the ethos of open competition based on individual worth and excellence was a benchmark the service wanted to retain.

“Those in personnel examined health records to ensure the candidate was free from illness”

From time to time, the commission was also more lenient in respect of temporary appointments, where judgement on who or who not to take on had less long-term significance. Some might argue that such concessions were marred by a lack of professionalism, but selection is not always an exact science and almost all recruitment methods have weaknesses.

In the 21st century, the Fast Stream is designed to provide cohorts of graduates with the opportunity to become the future leaders of the civil service. In 2019, recruitment is more closely geared to filling vacancies – rather than simply creating a pool of candidates – and there is more emphasis on improving diversity. In contrast to former practice, techniques such as the “e-tray” are used as a timed exercise that lasts

80 minutes. Candidates have five days to take this. The e-tray aims to test how they cope with real-world scenarios.

The new emphasis on technology promises a more modern approach. But it still adheres to the legacy of appointment on individual merit, handed down by our Victorian predecessors.

About the author

Dr Richard Willis is a visiting scholar based at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London