

# ERNEST GOWERS AND THE 'LOAN COLLECTION' COHORT: CIVIL SERVICE RESPONSES TO CRISES AND AUSTERITY IN THE 20TH CENTURY

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Addressing the annual Civil Service dinner in 1925, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin said:

Unlike Cabinet Ministers who have their fame entombed in rows of bulging biographies, the great Civil Servants often hardly attain to the humble dignity of a footnote to history. A Civil Servant does good by stealth and would blush to find it fame; a Cabinet Minister does good by publicity and would resign if he failed to secure it! It is easy to decide which is the more indispensable to a nation's welfare. The country easily survives the frequent changes of ministries; it hardly moved a muscle when a Labour Government climbed for a moment to office; but it would receive a staggering blow if the Civil Service suddenly took it into its head to resign tomorrow. Some Governments are in office but not in power; the Civil Service is always in office and always in power.<sup>2</sup>

Twenty-five years later, Edward Bridges gave a lecture about the Civil Service entitled 'Portrait of a Profession: The Civil Service Tradition', in which he provided an overview of the stages through which the Civil Service had developed since the Northcote-Trevelyan Report: the introduction of central recruitment through the open, competitive entry examination; the establishment of the 'Loan Collection' which for the first time drew staff together from a range of departments to manage a particular major project; the establishment of a number of new departments during the First World War; and, finally, the transfer of senior staff between departments.<sup>3</sup>

This prompted a storm of controversy about the Civil Service, fuelled in an article by political economist Thomas Balogh. Entitled 'Apotheosis of a Dilettante' Balogh roundly attacked the examination through which this cohort was selected as encouraging a 'purposefully useless, somewhat dilettante, erudition which would keep "dangerous thoughts" well away'.<sup>4</sup> He described the formal establishment of the unified Civil Service in 1919 as 'total victory' from the point of view of the permanent bureaucrats'.

Ernest Gowers was one of Balogh's targets. Gowers was described in his obituary in *The Times* as one of the 'greatest civil servants' of his day. He was one member of a group of high fliers who joined the Civil Service administrative class at the turn of the 20th century, and who had to adapt to dramatic changes not only in the way in which the Civil Service was managed, but also in the external environment. The background of these men was diverse. The majority, but not all, had studied the Classics. It is often assumed that they came from privileged backgrounds, but this was often not the case. Most joined because they needed a secure income. Gowers' father was a self-made man, who lifted himself out of his working class background through self-education and hard work and then steered his sons into Civil Service careers.

A number of eminent authors have written about this cohort and the pre-Thatcher, pre-Fulton 20th century Civil Service. Richard Chapman, Peter O'Toole, Peter Barberis and others have held this group under the microscope of academic analysis. The question is therefore: what more is there to write about this group of powerful men? The answer is that an archive of papers has been uncovered, providing an additional documentary source for empirical research, enabling the era to be viewed in close-up from the perspective of one of the participants, not as self-serving autobiography, but as a contemporary commentary on managing in an environment of challenging, often extremely difficult, and sometimes dangerous events.

The cohort included John Anderson, Warren Fisher, Arthur Salter, and Claud Schuster, all of whom either wrote autobiographies or were the subject of biographies. Gowers was an exception. One of the aims of the biography, *Ernest Gowers: Plain Words and Forgotten Deeds*, therefore, was to fill this gap. The book examines the life of one member of the cohort, but the others are all actors in the narrative, as their lives and careers continued to intersect.

## THE 'LOAN COLLECTION'

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<sup>1</sup> This paper focusses on one aspect of the biography *Ernest Gowers: Plain Words and Forgotten Deeds*, (Palgrave Macmillan 2006) by Ann Scott, Adjunct Professor, Centre for the Government of Queensland, School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics, The University of Queensland, Australia. [aemscott@bigpond.net.au](mailto:aemscott@bigpond.net.au).

<sup>2</sup> Baldwin, S. (1925). Address to Civil Service dinner. *Baldwin Papers*, Cambridge University Library.

<sup>3</sup> Bridges, E. E. (1950). *Portrait of a profession: the Civil Service tradition*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Balogh, T. (1959). 'The Apotheosis of the Dilettante' in *The Establishment* London, Ace Books.

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The 'Loan Collection' was the nickname given to a group of men who were brought together in 1911-12 to implement Lloyd-George's National Insurance Scheme. They had all had their first Civil Service experience in other departments, in Gowers' case the Inland Revenue and the India Office, where the Under-Secretary of State for India spotted him as a young man with promise and made him his Principal Private Secretary.<sup>5</sup> Gowers then moved to become PPS to Lloyd George when the Chancellor of the Exchequer was pushing his controversial National Insurance legislation through the Parliament.

Once passed, these sweeping new measures had to be implemented. Departments were asked to identify bright young men who would be capable of adapting to something entirely new - setting up one of the major planks of the new welfare state. John Anderson, Warren Fisher, Alexander Maxwell, Arthur Salter and Claud Schuster moved from their home departments to the Commission's headquarters in Wellington House, Buckingham Gate. Gowers moved from his position as Lloyd George's PPS.<sup>6</sup> Other men were brought in from outside the Civil Service. They all joined the Loan Collection, a team being established under Charles Masterman MP, and the brilliant, but rather unstable, civil servant Robert Morant. Gowers wrote later:

The members of the Loan Collection were carefully handpicked; they had to be, for they were a desperate remedy. ... Later, when the measure had been safely launched, the work became largely routine, and the pioneers formed a pool of expertise that could be drawn on for other purposes, especially the numerous other new duties that were increasingly placed by Parliament on the Executive. ...

This gigantic task of bringing the National Health and Unemployment Insurance Acts into operation taught the Service what it could do, and the control of the whole of the social and economic life of the nation during the war drove home the lesson. The Service is not now afraid of administrative difficulties.<sup>7</sup>

### THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The work of implementing the National Insurance Act was interrupted by the need to respond on the home front to the challenges posed by the First World War. Senior civil servants were not permitted to enlist for the fighting services. Anderson took over as Secretary of the Insurance Commission, Fisher moved to the Board of Inland Revenue, Salter became Director of Ship Requisitioning at the Admiralty.

Gowers and Schuster remained at Wellington House, but were assigned to new duties. They became part of a highly secret propaganda organisation, still under the direction of Charles Masterman MP, which took its name from the building in which they were housed. Initially Schuster became Chief Executive Officer. Gowers took over in 1915 when Schuster moved on to become Clerk of the Crown in Chancery and Permanent Secretary in the Lord Chancellor's Office.

The Wellington House propaganda unit was established, probably at Lloyd George's suggestion, 'to inform and influence public opinion abroad and to confute German mis-statements and sophistries'.<sup>8</sup>

Charles Masterman enlisted the help of the leaders of the press, major publishing houses and established authors to produce propaganda books and leaflets. Wellington House managed the process but their imprint never appeared on any publication. Questions were asked in Parliament about whether such a unit existed, but were always firmly evaded. It was not until the 1930s that their role became public knowledge. One of the National Insurance Commission staff described the atmosphere in the early days of Wellington House:

One of the war activities which was concentrated in our head office at Wellington House, and intrigued us greatly, was the Hush-Hush Press Bureau, in which all sorts of authors and other literary

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<sup>5</sup> Gowers served four Under-Secretaries for India over a period of three years.

<sup>6</sup> Gowers appears to have been moved out of Lloyd George's office in order to make way for Lloyd George's mistress, Frances Stevenson (later Lady Lloyd George). See Scott, A. (2010). Ernest Gowers: Plain Words and Forgotten Deeds. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>7</sup> Gowers, E. A. (undated). Reminiscences of Lloyd George and the first National Insurance Act. Gowers archives.

<sup>8</sup> Sanders, M. L. and P. M. Taylor (1982). British Propaganda during the First World War, 1914-18. London, Macmillan. pp.38-9.

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people were enrolled. It was quite refreshing to find oneself going up in the lift in the morning with Anthony Hope for example.<sup>9</sup>

This rather heady atmosphere did not last long once the horror of the war became known and the impact of the death toll was touching almost every family in the country. In addition, Charles Masterman lost his place in the Cabinet and his influence over the direction of Wellington House. The press felt they could do the job better and eventually Wellington House became absorbed into the short-lived Ministry of Information under the direction of the newly-elevated Lord Beaverbrook.

### THE CIVIL SERVICE PROFESSION IN THE POST-WAR YEARS

Gowers had left Wellington House in February 1917, and resumed his duties in the Commission before being made Executive Officer to the newly-established Conciliation and Arbitration Board for Government Employees. The pay and conditions for civil servants before the war had been haphazard, with few avenues for raising grievances. Moves towards a unified Civil Service raised issues of wage parity. The Board was established to provide independent arbitration. Its role was eventually overtaken by the Whitley Councils, but *The Times*, commenting in January 1918 on the number of cases it had dealt with, wrote that in its first year there 'must have been few Civil Servants who have not been affected, directly or indirectly, by the operations of the Board'.<sup>10</sup>

Before the end of the war the Government started to look at how the government operated. Lloyd George had asked Lord Haldane to chair a committee on the machinery of government, to consider the overall purpose, character, and composition of British government. The Haldane report was handed down in December 1918. In 1919 Warren Fisher was appointed Permanent Secretary to the Treasury and Head of the Civil Service, firmly convinced of the merits of a unified Civil Service and of the 'generalist' administrator who could move between departments. The Civil Service wanted to establish itself as a profession and, on the initiative of the major staff associations, established the Institute of Public Administration in 1922, appointing Haldane as its first President. This consolidation was the perceived 'total victory' resented by Balogh.

The Institute invited Gowers to address one of its early meetings. This was one of the first of many speeches he gave over the years on the role of the Civil Service:

The Institute, if I understand its purposes aright, is a product of that new spirit which is one of the few good results of the war; the spirit which is stirring us to think for ourselves instead of taking things for granted, which is leading us no longer to accept without question traditional views but rather to ask them to justify themselves on merits, which is not satisfied with phrases but looks behind them for the facts that they profess to represent. ...

The veil that shrouds us is wearing thin, and there is a tendency for Parliament, the Press and the Public to peer through the holes. We are naturally indignant at this. No-one likes being hit when he cannot hit back. It is not playing the game. ...

In all essentials the theory of ministerial responsibility is still firmly established. And it is right that I should add that, on the whole the fiction is maintained by those whom we serve, even in the most trying circumstances, with a loyalty that ought to command our warm admiration. Perhaps on the other hand there may have been cases - although I think they have been very rare - in which civil servants, finding themselves unexpectedly in the warm glow of limelight, have not skipped back into the wings with quite that alacrity which constitutional theory demands.<sup>11</sup>

### POLITICAL TURMOIL IN THE 1920s

It was at this point that Warren Fisher became highly influential, not least in his oversight of senior Civil Service appointments, remaining in his position until just before the start of the Second World War, and it was this power that rankled with men who previously had had influence over government policy from outside

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<sup>9</sup> Harris, R. W. (1939). *Not So Humdrum: The autobiography of a Civil Servant*. London, John Lane. p.201.

<sup>10</sup> (1918). Pay of Civil Servants: Successful Arbitration Experiment. *The Times*. London.

<sup>11</sup> Gowers, E. A. (c1922). Address to the Institute of Public Administration. London, Gowers archive. The ms is missing a page.

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the service, or men such as William Beveridge or John Maynard Keynes who had easily moved in and out of the Civil Service. Fisher's influence made it seem more of an exclusive 'closed shop'.

Anderson was just as influential as Permanent Under-Secretary at the Home Office, appointed in 1922 to a position he held for ten years, but he and Salter had far more wide-ranging careers.<sup>12</sup> Salter joined the United Nations Secretariat after the war. Schuster and Maxwell were far less mobile. Schuster remained permanent head in the Lord Chancellor's Office from 1915 to 1944 - a total of 29 years. Maxwell went back to the Home Office, where he remained until 1948.

Gowers became Permanent Head of the Department of Mines, and remained involved in the coal industry until 1946, with a short break as Chairman of the Board of Inland Revenue from 1928 to 1930. He fitted Stanley Baldwin's description - governments changed, ministers came and went, and he remained a powerful but largely unseen influence over the mining industry until it was finally nationalised after the Second World War. He quickly made up his mind about the problems of the coal industry, and spent nearly 30 years urging, or trying to compel, owners to amalgamate their mining operations. He supported the idea of nationalisation from the start, and argued strongly against the economic philosophy of 'laissez-faire'. Supple has described his influence over those years:

In spite of the poor reputation of the Mines Department, it did produce a critically significant administrator - Sir Ernest Gowers - whose influence permeated most of the interwar discussions of the industry, and endured into an altogether more considerable role in the early 1940s. Gowers was ... extensively relied on by Cabinet Ministers for advice and initiatives in the crisis discussions of 1925-6.<sup>13</sup>

1926 was, of course, the year of the painful and long drawn-out miners' strike, as well as the week-long general strike in May. Anderson was Permanent Under-Secretary at the Home Office and attended the daily conferences during that week. Gowers recalled that he crossed paths with Anderson during the strike because both were 'at the centre of things':

It was an unforgettable experience to watch [Anderson] dominate the meeting and rally a set of rather jittery ministers, himself confident and imperturbable, sometimes even verging on the contemptuous.<sup>14</sup>

The miners strike dragged on long after the general strike. By the end of November most mineworkers who could went back to work on terms far worse than they could have had at the beginning of the strike. Everyone involved was exhausted.

The Government decided to draw up new legislation in order to compel mine amalgamations, and while this was being prepared Gowers became Chair of the Board of Inland Revenue.

### FINANCIAL CRISIS - DAYS OF AUSTERITY

At this point he went into print for the Institute of Public Administration, in an article that focussed partly on ministerial responsibility and partly on the theme he was to come back to later: the importance of ensuring that correspondence with the public was clear and humane. Between 1900 and 1930 the staff in the Department of Inland Revenue had increased from 5,345 to 21,342, reflecting the unwelcome increase in taxes since the turn of the century. Letters to *The Times* complained about the high-handed, and sometimes incomprehensible, correspondence from His Majesty's Inspectors of Taxes.<sup>15</sup> The title of Gowers' Institute address, 'Mainly about the King's English', was a reference to the work of the Fowler brothers who in *The King's English* had had a tilt at the English used by journalists.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Scott, A. (2009). *Ernest Gowers: Plain Words and Forgotten Deeds*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>13</sup> Supple, B. (1987). *The History of the British Coal Industry 1913-1946: The Political Economy of Decline*. Oxford, Clarendon Press. p.596-7.

<sup>14</sup> Gowers, E. A. (c1950). Sir John Anderson, Viscount Waverley, Gowers archives.

<sup>15</sup> Gowers, E. A. (1929). "Mainly about the King's English." *Public Administration* VII(2): 182-191.

<sup>16</sup> Fowler, H. W., and Fowler, F G (1906). *The King's English*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.

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But while Gowers was at the Board, the Government was drawing up its mines legislation. The *Coal Act 1930* turned out to be toothless, and caused him eight years of frustration. The Act created the Coal Mines Reorganization Commission, and was intended to force mine amalgamations. Gowers was made Chairman of the Commission and formally resigned from the Civil Service. He became momentarily a cause celebre as he was offered a salary that had been calculated to reflect similar salaries for chairs of public utilities, but this was at the moment when the Great Depression was hitting home. Rebellion amongst some of Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald's backbenchers when the appointment went to Parliament for approval nearly caused the downfall of the Government.

The mine owners refused to cooperate with Gowers and the Commission. In 1934 he wrote an article for *The Times*:

I have had on more than one occasion to recall the remark once made by Mr Keynes to the effect that the devotees of capital are apt, in their conservatism to reject reforms in its technique which might really strengthen and preserve it, for fear that they may prove to be the first step away from capitalism itself. But coal owners who do this fall short of that enlightened self-interest which built up the industry. For nothing can be more certain than that the 'force of the necessity of things' will continue to drive the Parliamentary machine up against the industry; and it lies with the coal owners themselves - as it seems to me - to determine whether, at long last, that machine is used to destroy their capitalism or to fulfill it.<sup>17</sup>

In 1936, after a failed test case and the Government's decision to create a new Commission with greater powers, Gowers tendered his resignation, frustrated by his inability to act. His resignation was not accepted but he remained underemployed because of the legislative limbo. The Prime Minister's office approached Warren Fisher, to find work for his old Loan Collection colleague Gowers, to fill the void. Gowers was given 'special duties' in relation to Defence problems. He did not shed his coal connection. When the Coal Commission was established under the new Act he was again appointed as Chair.

He had time to reflect in public about 'The Place of the Civil Service in British Government' a speech in Paris, at the Sorbonne, commenting that:

The Civil Servant may show his Minister, with devastating logic, the choice that he must make between alternatives almost equally repellent in their difficulty or unpopularity. But the Minister will not accept such conclusions with uncritical alacrity. Ugly problems, if you leave them alone, sometimes have an odd way of evading logic and solving themselves. Brief life is the Minister's departmental portion. And there is always in reserve that capacity for last-minute recovery which is so characteristic of the British. We are born opportunists, and take a curious perverted pride in what we call 'muddling through'.<sup>18</sup> ...

But in the difficult times in which we are now living, the Minister and his advisers sometimes, I fancy, find themselves in opposite roles to those I have just described. All governments in all countries are being pressed more and more to find remedies for our social and economic diseases. It may be a choice not between this party and that party, but between stable government and social upheaval.<sup>19</sup>

### CIVIL DEFENCE AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The cohort that had worked together in the Loan Collection now began to direct their attention towards civil defence preparations.

From 1932-8 John Anderson had spent six, sometimes dangerous, years as Governor of Bengal. When he came home he was elected to Parliament as an Independent in the Edinburgh University seat. Salter had returned from the League of Nations to become a writer, and was made Gladstone Professor of Political Theory and Institutions and Fellow of All Souls in Oxford in 1934. In 1937 he was elected to Parliament in

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<sup>17</sup> (1934). Reorganizing the Coal Mines : Sir E A Gowers and Cooperation. *The Times*. London.

<sup>18</sup> Gowers was using the expression 'muddling through' in relation to public policy nearly 25 years before Lindblom popularised it.

<sup>19</sup> Gowers, E. A. (1935). The Place of the Civil Service in British Government. *British Institute of Paris*. Sorbonne, Paris. p.5.

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the Oxford University seat. Fisher had remained in the same position he had held since the end of the First World War. His view of his role in the build-up of Civil Defence has been disputed, but this is what he wrote:

We all remember the wise saw of the British Empire coming to being 'in a fit of absence of mind' and, so far as Ministers were concerned (and they weren't), this is applicable to the initiation of what later became known as Civil Defence. You'll have inferred that in the 30s my colleagues, the Chiefs of Staff, and I did not share the easy optimism of our Ministers. In this atmosphere, haphazardly if indeed not slyly, the embryo of Civil Defence began faintly to move.<sup>20</sup>

Salter established an Air Raid Precautions League in Oxford which ran an energetic press campaign and published a series of pamphlets setting out a policy that was 'completely different from the policy and preparations of the Government of the day'. John Anderson was a member of the group.

Salter later recalled that by 1938 he had become 'obsessed' with the possible effect of air attacks on the country and the gross inadequacy of the Government's civil defence preparations:

What was true and was certain was that the official plans at the time for defence against air attack were scandalously inadequate. The plans consisted largely of defence against the least of the dangers - that of a gas attack. ... Defence against the much more serious danger of the bombing of the great centres of population was then practically non-existent. Whitehall shrank from planning, on any substantial scale, evacuation ... and was scared of mentioning the word 'evacuation' at all.<sup>21</sup>

Anderson also had a critical role inside Government. Neville Chamberlain made him Lord Privy Seal in November 1938, to 'take in hand, as the darkening shadows overspread Western Europe, the problems of manpower and civil defence'.

Gowers himself was 'cast for a different role' from the one he finally held:

I was earmarked as the official head of a new cocked-hat Minister of National Service which, as plans then stood, was to be set up, independently of the Ministry of Labour, to be supreme in the allocation of manpower - to tell the whole population what each had to do. I cannot be too thankful to have escaped my fate. For the year or two for which the grim prospect lasted it was my duty to preside over a sub-committee of the Committee for Imperial Defence for the making of manpower plans. The broad lines we followed were something like this. It was probable - so we all thought then - that the first action of the enemy against us would be an all-out attempt to knock us out from the air. We ought therefore to be generous in the initial allocation of manpower to Civil Defence.<sup>22</sup>

He didn't do a bad job. His obituary described his achievement:

[Gowers] played a large part in bringing the Services and interested departments together in a single policy that took practical shape in the famous *Schedule of Reserved Occupations*. Some observers described his handling of this sub-committee as an object lesson the delicate art of reconciling departmental differences.<sup>23</sup>

Warren Fisher and Maurice Hankey, (Secretary to the Committee of Imperial Defence from 1912 to 1938) suggested to the Committee of Imperial Defence that in wartime two 'institutional novelties' should be created for civil defence: a Ministry of Home Security, and an overriding regional organisation. This was accepted. In September 1938, during the Munich crisis, John Anderson was secretly appointed Regional Commissioner for London and the Home Counties. He appointed Harold Scott from the Home Office as his Chief Staff Officer. There was feverish activity starting preparations until Chamberlain came back from Munich, when they returned to their normal roles. Fisher's opposition to the Munich agreement marked the end of what had been a close working relationship with Neville Chamberlain, and Fisher resigned. He left the Treasury in May 1939.

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<sup>20</sup> Fisher, N. F. W. (1948). "The Beginnings of Civil Defence." *Public Administration* XXVI(4): 211-217. p.214.

<sup>21</sup> Salter, A. (1967). *Slave of the Lamp: a public servant's notebook*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson. p.33.

<sup>22</sup> Gowers, E. A. (1942). Address to Zone and Battalion Commanders of the Home Guard.

<sup>23</sup> (1966). Obituary : Sir E Gowers, author of Plain Words. *The Times*. London.

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Once it was clear that the Munich agreement was worthless, a new structure was determined. At the outbreak of war Anderson became Home Secretary and Minister of Home Security, with responsibility for civil defence, evacuation arrangements, internment of aliens and other measures required in war. Although not a member of the War Cabinet, he attended its meetings regularly. When Churchill formed the Coalition Government on 10 May 1940, he asked Anderson to continue in office.

Harold Scott came back as Chief Administrator of London Region, and prepared Civil Defence Headquarters, building a bunker under the Geological Survey Office at the Natural History Museum in Cromwell Road.

In April 1939 Anderson wrote to the nominees for the civil defence regional commissioner positions. Gowers was appointed regional commissioner for London Region and Warren Fisher for North Western Region. The Senior Regional Commissioners were intended to be community leaders or Ministers. The Minister for Transport, Euan Wallace, was appointed Senior Regional Commissioner over Gowers.

The regional commissioners were given extraordinary powers for use in an emergency:

If communication with the Government becomes very difficult or impossible, it may be necessary for you to act on behalf of the Government, and emergency measures outside the powers of the Departmental representatives may have to be taken without consultation with Ministers.

In such circumstances you will, on behalf of the Government, take such steps as in your judgment are necessary for the public safety and you will be entitled to expect all persons to give you facilities or assistance in pursuance of their duty to cooperate in the defence of the realm. Such action, duly recorded, will be supported by the Government, and the Government will ask Parliament to give you whatever indemnification may subsequently be found necessary.<sup>24</sup>

They were viewed highly suspiciously by the local authorities, a relationship requiring considerable diplomacy. London Region was particularly complex as it embraced so many local authorities.

'Civil defence' included providing air raid wardens, firefighting services, first-aid, rescue and decontamination squads and bomb reconnaissance units. But the broader role included: providing shelters; making arrangements for air raid warnings and the blackout; the supply, maintenance and distribution of special equipment; the recruitment and training of staff to carry out new and often unpredictable tasks, as well as manpower planning. Throughout the war, the civil defence organisation had to be ready to adjust to new forms of attack.

A coded telegram went out on 23 August 1939 telling the regions to take up battle stations. Gowers, Scott and the second regional commissioner, naval hero Admiral Evans 'of the Broke', settled in to the Geological Survey Office and continued preparing the region for attack.<sup>25</sup> In May 1940, when the air raids began, the Senior Regional Commissioner, Euan Wallace, took up his position. In July 1940 the Battle of Britain began, and in August the first bombs fell on London.

Euan Wallace's health was failing and in October 1940 he left on sick leave, and Gowers became acting Senior Regional Commissioner in his place. Wallace died early the following year. Gowers remained as Senior Regional Commissioner for the rest of the war. His obituary in *The Times* commented:

In this post he showed his full powers as an administrator, and indeed as a leader. Energetic, forceful, always cheerful, with an unflinching eye for the essential he gave the impression of being master of every unexpected development and, as a result, infused confidence into all who came in contact with him.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Churchill, W. (1939). Letter appointing Sir Ernest Gowers Regional Civil Defence Commissioner for London.

<sup>25</sup> Evans' role was largely to boost public morale. Ziegler writes that he was 'noisy, extrovert, endlessly good-humoured'. He 'appeared the first morning on horseback and never ceased to delight and outrage his colleagues by his extravagance and informality'. (Ziegler, P. (1995) *London at War 1939-45*, Alfred A Knopf, NY. p.28).

<sup>26</sup> 'Obituary: Sir Ernest Gowers, author of *Plain Words*', *The Times*, 18 April 1966.

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When the problem of bomb damage and rubble became an issue to solve Gowers asked that Warren Fisher be brought down to London from the less threatened North Western Region to become a Special Commissioner to organise the clearance and salvage of debris.

Early in October 1940, Churchill promoted Herbert Morrison to the dual roles of Home Secretary and Minister of Home Security. Churchill appointed Anderson Lord President of the Council, making him virtually in charge of the 'home front'. It has been suggested that he was shifted because his 'austere and impersonal manner' was unsuited to raising the morale of the inhabitants of the devastated East End, and that his replacement, Morrison, was seen as 'the only man that Londoners trust ... If London runs, the war will be lost'.<sup>27</sup>

Anderson had been enmeshed in a debilitating parliamentary and press debate about the virtue of developing deep shelters, which he opposed. The need to provide adequate shelter remained one of the foremost problems for the London Region. The 'Anderson' shelters, designed under his direction before the war, proved to be dark and damp, and they did not keep out the sound of the bombing. People were reluctant to use them at night. In addition, they could not be installed unless houses had gardens. While Anderson's transfer in 1940 was not in any way a demotion, he is said to have been deeply disappointed by it.<sup>28</sup> Gowers provided an assessment of Anderson's contribution to the preparation for war:

We were thrown together again in the months preceding and following the outbreak of the second war when, at his invitation, I had undertaken the post of Regional Commissioner for London for which he had himself been designated at the time of Munich. I thus had an inside view of the work about which the author of the Official History of Civil Defence, departing for once from the rule he evidently set himself to allot neither praise nor blame, has truly said that for the difference between our preparedness in 1939 and 1938 the the country owed to Anderson 'a debt which cannot be measured'.<sup>29</sup>

In 1942 Warren Fisher's tenure came to an abrupt end after a public dispute with Morrison. Fisher wrote to the press defending an ex-colleague from the North Western Region who had resigned after being mildly disciplined for using official vehicles and petrol to ferry fire officers to a football match between the fire services of two regions. Morrison was furious, and when Fisher refused to resign, Morrison sacked him.

Gowers remained as Senior Regional Commissioner for the London Region for the rest of the war.

### POST-WAR RECONSTRUCTION

After the war some of the 'Loan Collection' cohort faded from view, others maintained their influence. Anderson left politics in 1952 when his university seat was abolished and he had rejected an offer from Churchill to join his peacetime administration. He retired (as Lord Waverley) and died in 1958. Fisher died shortly after the war, in 1948. Schuster retired in 1944 after 29 years as Permanent Secretary, and having served 10 Lord Chancellors. He also was elevated to the peerage. He joined the Allied Commission for Austria established in 1945. Maxwell retired from the Home Office in 1948. Salter was made Deputy Director General of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in New York. When his tenure was up the position was offered to Gowers, who turned it down. Gowers wrote to his son that 'never was an organisation in such a mess since the world began' and that he had had enough of bombing and wanted to turn his attention to something more constructive.

Harlow New Town was one such thing. Rehousing the people who had been bombed out of their homes had caused the Government to embark on a massive building program. Several new towns were established, Harlow being one of the first. But Gowers was ageing, and younger civil servants were gaining influence. He found himself in conflict with Minister Silkin's advisers over one of architect Frank Gibberd's ideas:

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<sup>27</sup> Donoghue, B. and G. W. Jones (1973). Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson. p.284.

<sup>28</sup> Wheeler-Bennett, S. J. (1962). John Anderson; Viscount Waverley. London, Macmillan. p.225.

<sup>29</sup> Gowers, E. A. (c1950). Sir John Anderson, Viscount Waverley, Gowers archives.

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Silkin was flanked, as I remember, by at least four senior civil servants, who had already taken a stand against the scheme. It was a tricky situation. It was recognised, I think, that this was a test case.<sup>30</sup>

Gowers and his team won but he was not forgiven by the Civil Service. He became known (together with Lord Reith) as one of the 'difficult' new town chairmen. When his term was up he was not reappointed. In 1950 he went to see the new Minister, Hugh Dalton, expecting to be reappointed. Dalton told him that at 70 he was too old. Gowers, shocked, expressed surprise that the Government would have just appointed him to chair the Royal Commission into Capital Punishment if they thought him too old. His Harlow colleagues felt it was punishment for his forthrightness and a number of the Board members resigned. Sir William Beveridge, chair of Stevenage New Town Corporation, received the same treatment, at the hands of Harold Macmillan. He received a four-line note saying he was too old for the job. His wife commented to A L Rowse that: 'It was awfully raw, you know'.<sup>31</sup>

But there may have been another reason for Gowers falling out of favour with some civil servants, and that was the publication of his (and His Majesty's Stationery Office) instant best-seller *Plain Words*.<sup>32</sup> In 1945 Sir Edward Bridges had been appointed Permanent Secretary to the Treasury and Head of the Civil Service. He turned his attention to implementing recommendations in the 1944 Assheton Report on Civil Service Training.

In the lull between the Blitz and the Little Blitz the London Region's social club ran a lecture series, at which Gowers, rather tired of the avalanche of impenetrable official circulars, gave an address on Civil Service English, using examples of bad English from the circulars. Bridges had heard about the talk and asked him to write a training pamphlet on Civil Service English. This was the genesis of *Plain Words* and the beginning of a 20-year second career for Gowers, as an authority on English usage.

The history of Harlow New Town records the response of some civil servants to the publication of *Plain Words*:

We ought not to forget the very mixed feelings which the publication of *Plain Words* provoked in Civil Service circles. Sir Thomas Sheepshanks, who was then Permanent Secretary of the Ministry [of Housing] made the point that a number of very senior people felt the work demeaned the civil servant.<sup>33</sup>

The Treasury list of 'the Great and the Good' provided another outlet for Gowers' undiminished energy. He became known as Britain's 'No 1 Chairman', conducting inquiries into Capital Punishment; Foot and Mouth Disease; Women in the Foreign Service; Buildings of Outstanding Architectural Merit; and the Opening Hours of Shops. Even Gowers was rather bewildered by the range of topics, suggesting later that the only thing that the foot and mouth disease inquiry had in common with the Royal Commission into Capital Punishment was that 'they were both to do with slaughter policies'.<sup>34</sup>

At 75 he accepted a commission from the Clarendon Press to undertake the first revision of *Fowler's Modern English Usage*. The work took him ten years to complete.

### CONCLUSIONS

Whichever of Balogh's 'dangerous thoughts' this cohort of mainly Classics-trained civil servants were keeping 'well away', the combination of education and diversity of experiences turned many of them into extraordinarily flexible and effective generalists.

Of Gowers' contemporaries, only Arthur Salter lived long enough to be able to comment on the changes being considered by the Fulton Committee in 1967. He did not claim the Civil Service was perfect. But he described the development and implementation of the 1911 National Insurance Act as conditions under

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<sup>30</sup> Gibberd, F. (1980). *Harlow: The Story of a New Town*, Publications for Companies. p.22.

<sup>31</sup> Rowse, A. L. (2004). *The Diaries of A L Rowse*. London, Penguin Books. p.169.

<sup>32</sup> For the saga of the payment of royalties rather than a lump sum to Gowers, see Chapman, R. A. (1988). *Ethics in the British Civil Service*. London, Routledge.

<sup>33</sup> Gibberd, F. (1980). *Harlow: The Story of a New Town*, Publications for Companies. p.57.

<sup>34</sup> Gowers, E. A. (undated). Petersfield Autumn Show Dinner.

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which civil servants were able to perform at their best. He singled out the creation of the Health Insurance System in 1911 and the following Insurance Commission years; and the conduct of the civil part of administration in the ensuing war, when the permanent officials and those recruited from business and industry worked in equal and successful partnership. In both cases, Salter wrote, the official had the spur of urgent necessity and the opportunity of seeing directly what, and whom, he was directing.<sup>35</sup>

Despite Fisher's strong support for the concept of the mobile, generalist civil servant, the cohort did not consistently demonstrate this characteristic.

Fisher himself became so influential as Permanent Secretary to the Treasury and Head of the Civil Service that there was nowhere to move to, and he remained in the position until he fell out with Chamberlain after Munich. Afterwards he fell from grace during the Second World War when he misjudged his own power and 'went public' in defence of his old civil defence region. He also ruffled a fair number of feathers when he was clearing the bomb debris, spending money as if he were still at the Treasury rather than going through the proper channels.

Two other members of the cohort spent their careers in one department. Alexander Maxwell entered the Home Office in 1904 and, with the exception of his time with the Loan Collection, remained in there, rising to become permanent under-secretary in 1938. One of his appointments after he retired in 1948 was to the Royal Commission into Capital Punishment, chaired by Gowers. Schuster stayed in the same position for almost his entire career.

By comparison, Anderson was highly mobile, and always influential. Not only did he move from the Civil Service to become a member of parliament, he spent six years as Governor of Bengal.<sup>36</sup> He was unusual in the cohort as he had a science degree from Edinburgh rather than studying classics at Oxbridge. This scientific competence was drawn on by the government in both the First and Second World War. Despite his disappointment at being replaced by Morrison as Home Secretary and Minister for Home Security in 1940, he proved that a generalist could perform in a wide range of highly influential, though different, positions. His most noticeable shortcoming was that he was not a good performer in the House of Commons. The manner that suited him well as an administrator was not as effective in parliamentary debate. But it was 'generally agreed in Whitehall that he was the greatest administrator of his age, perhaps of any age'.<sup>37</sup>

Salter also moved between the Civil Service, politics and university life. He later claimed, with typical self-deprecation, that he alone of the members of the Loan Collection was pushed from his department, the Admiralty, rather than being selected for his competence. His specialised knowledge of shipping was used by the government in both wars. In the Second World War he became parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Shipping and headed a mission to Washington to press the US for a vast program of new construction. When his Oxford university seat in parliament was abolished he stood for Ormskirk and was re-elected. He left the government in 1953. As well as being elevated to the peerage, he received many including eight honorary doctorates.

Gowers endured 30 years battling with the mine owners, and for that reason might not be counted as a generalist. However, he proved highly adaptable throughout his career, including stepping into Euan Wallace's position as Senior Regional Commissioner for Civil Defence in London in October 1940 and running the civil defence of England's capital for the rest of the war. After the war he continued to prove his intellectual and policy competence through the many inquiries he chaired. During research for his biography it was notable that each report of the range of committees that he chaired was commended for the quality of its research and the clarity with which its conclusions were argued. He was a superb exponent of the art of gathering the evidence for evidence-based policymaking. Of all the inquiries he chaired, the one that touched him most was the inquiry into capital punishment, and its report was praised by many different commentators, including Oxford's Professor of Jurisprudence, H L A Hart, who wrote:

Within the confines of this report, there is a far more comprehensive, dispassionate, and lucid evaluation of the arguments both as to questions of fact and to questions of law and principle relevant to murder and its punishment, than in any of the many books published in either of our

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<sup>35</sup> Salter, A. (1967). *Slave of the Lamp: a public servant's notebook*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson. p.278.

<sup>36</sup> It has been suggested that he deliberately put himself in danger because he had been deeply upset by being handed a white feather when walking down Whitehall during the First World War.

<sup>37</sup> Peden, G. C. (2004). Anderson, John, first Viscount Waverley (1882-1958). *ODNB*. Oxford, OUP.

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countries [Britain and the US] on this subject. Certainly the publication of this report in England introduced altogether new standards of clarity and relevance into discussions of a subject which had too often been obscured by ignorance and prejudice. The value of this most remarkable document was not diminished by the fact that the Commission's terms of reference postulated the retention of the death penalty.<sup>38</sup>

The evidence the Royal Commission gathered changed his mind about capital punishment. He became an deeply committed abolitionist, writing a book, *A Life for a Life*<sup>39</sup>, explaining his arguments. He arranged with the publishers to produce the book in record time in order to distribute it to members of the House of Lords (which had been blocking the more abolitionist House of Commons for years) just before they held a crucial debate on capital punishment.

Finally, he proved to us all that it is possible have a long productive life after formal retirement, by becoming a best-selling English language expert, and, at the age of 75, entering into a contract with the Clarendon Press to undertake the first revision of the classic *Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage*.

He died in 1966, the year after capital punishment was finally abolished and his revision of *Fowler's Modern English Usage* was published.

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<sup>38</sup> Hart, H. L. A. (1957). "Murder and the Principles of Punishment: England and the United States." North Western University Law Review **52**: 433-461.

<sup>39</sup> Gowers, S. E. (1956). A Life for a Life? The Problem of Capital Punishment. London, Chatto and Windus.

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