

Old and New Labour Narratives of Whitehall: Radicals, Reactionaries and Defenders of the Westminster Model

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THROUGHOUT the course of the last century, notable figures from within the wider Labour movement such as G. D. H. Cole, Harold Laski, Thomas Balogh and Tony Benn offered a critical appraisal of the civil service. Unlike the leadership of the party, which, as we see below, has tended to embrace a benign view of Whitehall, they questioned whether it was an institution capable of working for a left-of-centre government with radical aspirations. This article reflects on the contemporary nature of this debate. It considers the extent to which the Labour administration under the leadership of Blair and now Brown has continued to embrace the status quo, despite the broader rhetorical claims of being a radical, reforming government and whether there remains a contemporary radical tradition wishing to see more fundamental reform of the civil service.

The Labour leadership's benign view of Whitehall

Early in Labour's first term, Tony Blair declared that his government had no intention of politicising Whitehall. In what was seen as a reaffirmation of the nineteenth-century principles of Northcote–Trevelyan, he observed 'a neutral civil service is one of the great assets of our political system and we will not put it at risk. I and my colleagues can look after the politics. . . . It is your [Whitehall's] job to respond with high quality advice and

excellent public services.'¹ Blair's comments can be seen as reaffirming a *modus operandi* espoused by all previous Labour leaders concerning how the party should define its relationship with Whitehall.

The seeds of this approach can be traced back to the first two Labour governments (in 1924 and 1929–1931, respectively). Then, Ramsey MacDonald set out an *evolutionary* brand of socialism that rejected the notion of 'class war and its corollary that the state was the instrument of one dominant class'. MacDonald advocated a constitutionalist strategy of gaining control of the state by parliamentary means, which involved rejecting 'any philosophy or policy which might call into question the very mechanism by which the socialist society was to be progressively introduced'.² This established the principle that the party's main concern should be to establish its credentials as a legitimate and responsible party of government. *De facto*, MacDonald was embracing what was essentially a Whiggish outlook—a belief in gradual, evolutionary change, strong leadership and the ability of British institutions to be flexible and adaptable.³

Subsequent leaders have been willing to accept this outlook and the preservation of what is often referred to as the 'Westminster model'. It allows for a substantial centralisation of state power and sustains a top-down, closed and elitist system of government. In terms of the Civil Service, the model resides on maintaining constitutional conventions

of anonymity, permanence and neutrality. As importantly, it views the state as neutral and not biased towards certain interests. This then leads to a tacit acceptance that Whitehall would work with and not against the goals of a Labour government. Put simply, Labour ministers should embrace a benign view of Whitehall and in so doing, trust their civil servants. Over time, the party leadership has shown little tolerance towards those who have questioned the effectiveness of the long-established and firmly entrenched principles of this model.

An obvious question this raises is why has the Labour leadership been willing to uncritically embrace the Westminster model? The answer lies mainly in the extent to which it allows for the accrual of substantial power at the centre. This is a feature that the party leadership has regarded as essential for pursuing Labour's political agenda. It should also be recognised that, when in power, Labour has been fully aware of the need to prove its governing credentials. Until 2005, it had not achieved more than two consecutive terms of office, in contrast to the Conservatives, who throughout much of the last century could lay claim to being the natural party of government. The need not to appear revolutionary (which concomitantly implied a commitment to the Westminster model), coupled with the extensive political capital involved in challenging a model Labour believed it could use to its own ends, rendered wholesale reform an unappealing option. Finally, there was the actual experience of government and the 'comfort' in terms of support and resources that ministers received from the Civil Service, which dulled any perceived need for reform.⁴

Critics of Labour's constitutionalist strategy

Not surprisingly, those within the Labour movement who questioned this approach have rarely held centre stage and made few serious in-roads in shaping mainstream party thinking. From the intellectual wing, prominent Radical Syndicalists and Guild Socialists such as Cole, Penty, Carpenter and Snowden in the first quarter of the twentieth century railed against state monism, criticising the hierarchical structure of British government and the way in which power was aggregated at the centre. They advocated the transformation of capitalism through national worker-controlled guilds. Whitehall was regarded with great suspicion, being seen as an inherently conservative institution with a class bias and Oxbridge dominance that would seek to undermine a socialist government. This 'instrumentalist' critique was one that the MacDonald government was willing to pay some lip service to when it came to certain departments—most notably the Foreign Office, which it saw as detached from the rest of Whitehall and lacking any real transparency or democratic accountability. Elsewhere, one of MacDonald's ministers, George Lansbury, portrayed the Treasury as being thoroughly obstructionist. Yet beyond these critiques of individual departments, the party leadership generally viewed Whitehall not as a malign institution, but one with which it was happy to work. Winston Churchill said that Philip Snowden, the new Chancellor, was greeted with 'joy': 'The Treasury mind and the Snowden mind embraced each other with the fervour of two long-separated lizards.'⁵

Before and after the Second World War, Harold Laski took up the mantle of the intellectual critique set in place by the earlier English Pluralists, but his somewhat contradictory arguments for both a strong central state and a greater dispersal of power to civil society again made

little impression on the party's leaders. He was, however, among the first to observe that if a future Labour government set out to destroy established orthodoxies, the neutrality of the Civil Service would be severely challenged.

The 1945 Labour government certainly had the chance to make radical changes in Whitehall if it wished. Not only was it empowered by a resounding Labour majority, but the wartime years had shown the value of a new model, mixing career regulars with what in modern parlance would be termed 'specialist outsider' appointments. However, these 'irregulars' were allowed to return to their pre-war careers in business, academia and the law. Whitehall would not tolerate abandoning the 'cult of the generalist' enshrined in the Northcote-Trevelyan principles a century earlier.⁶ Attlee and his ministers embraced a benign view of the Civil Service and worked with the status quo in the belief that the successful mobilisation by Whitehall during the war years was a model that could be harnessed effectively in the pursuit of a new postwar social and economic settlement.

The only siren voices during this period again came from the extra-parliamentary, intellectual, wing. J. P. W. Mallalieu's *Passed to You Please* was highly critical of Whitehall's Edwardian amateurish approach, lack of technical expertise, inflexibility and inefficiency. Laski penned its introduction where he offered a caustic analysis of the 'Administrative Class' and suggestions for various reforms including recruitment of specialists, new training methods, abandoning the demarcation between specialists and generalists, breaking down Whitehall's hierarchical working patterns and creating a minister for the Civil Service. These ideas did eventually shape Labour thinking, re-emerging in part twenty years later in the Fulton Report.

During Labour's lengthy period in opposition (1951–1964), an extensive

debate emerged over the issue of Britain's 'decline', especially its relative economic decline compared to other world powers. As part of this debate, the institutionalist critique identified Whitehall as one of the 'guilty parties'. Notable contributions came from one of Harold Wilson's advisers, Thomas Balogh. His *The Apotheosis of the Dilettante* (1959) used the theme of decline to attack the myth that the Civil Service should be viewed as a 'Rolls-Royce like machine'. He argued that the 'amateurs' who ran Whitehall in a style predicated on the needs of the late nineteenth century were incapable of implementing a postwar settlement aimed at achieving full employment and establishing a new welfare state. In 1956, Richard Crossman used a Fabian lecture to express concerns over an increasingly powerful, centralised state bureaucracy, but concluded that this 'State Leviathan' was a necessary evil. Elsewhere, the Treasury again came in for particular criticism. The Plowden Report (1961) investigated the Treasury's control of expenditure and was critical of its amateurish and short-term approach. Later, a Fabian report, *The Administrators* (1964), concluded that the Treasury, even more than other departments, was isolated from the world of business and from British society.

Prior to the 1964 election, the Wilson front bench used the debate on decline to construct an image of a backward-looking and out-of-touch Conservative administration sustained in power by an outmoded government machine. This formed the springboard for the 'New Vision' manifesto the Labour party was to offer, commonly referred to as the 'White Heat of Technology'. Once in power, the Wilson government embraced elements of the institutionalist critique and called on Whitehall to recruit more specialist outsiders—especially those with scientific and economic expertise. Wilson set up the Fulton Committee to examine the structure, recruitment and

management of the Civil Service, with a view to improving its effectiveness, efficiency and economy, but stated that the government did not intend to alter the basic relationship between ministers and officials. This effectively ruled out the kind of wide-ranging review that could have challenged the Westminster model. The majority of the Cabinet, Wilson included, was not prepared to open-up a debate on the parameters of the model, seeing its potential value as being too great to risk challenging it.

Instead, it was the diaries kept by key ministers in Wilson's, and more latterly Callaghan's, governments that offered the first sustained 'insider' critique of Whitehall. Richard Crossman was struck by how 'terribly second rate' most of his civil servants were. He was equally critical of his own party for its lack of preparation in opposition and the rapid descent once in power into 'departmentalism' as colleagues succumbed to the embrace of their individual bureaucratic empires. Yet, Crossman failed to offer a coherent alternative as his view of Whitehall was that an astute and resolute minister (such as himself) could always overcome such hindrances.

An alternative critique did emerge from Tony Benn, shaped by his ministerial experiences in the 1974–1979 government. Benn's personal philosophy of openness, party democracy and accountability to his electorate and supporters, especially the trade unions, meant that he constantly guarded against 'Whitehall capture'. He remained unclubbable throughout his time as a minister, brought his own advisers to his departments and often clashed directly with his officials. The result was that Benn found it difficult to implement his agenda; a failure he later attributed to his officials. The problem was that he failed to recognise the informal rules of the Whitehall game and the lines of dependency that needed to be maintained with civil servants (and Cabinet colleagues) to achieve his goals. From

Whitehall's perspective, he upset various senior officials by ignoring and questioning their advice and by developing an alternative advice network. Subsequently, out of government, Benn formulated the view that the Civil Service represented a formidable obstacle to the aspirations of a Labour government with a socialist programme:

The problem arises from the fact the civil service sees itself as being above the party battle, with a political position of its own to defend against all-comers, including governments armed with their own philosophy and programme. Whitehall prefers consensus politics . . . they are always trying to steer incoming government back to the policy of the outgoing government, minus the mistakes that the civil service thought the outgoing government made.⁷

The Benn critique became part of what can be labelled the 'conspiratorial' view of Whitehall. This is not a view that is mutually exclusive to the left. Some from the Thatcherite right also subscribed to it when criticising Whitehall's perceived attachment to Keynesian welfare consensus politics. Benn interpreted his legitimacy as deriving not from Parliament or the Cabinet, but from the party and, in particular, the manifesto. The manifesto was an unchallengeable contract between the executive and the electorate—and the role of the Civil Service was to ensure the effective implementation of this contract. This interpretation emphasises particular elements of the Westminster model: the constitutional notion of ministerial authority and responsibility, and a belief that officials are there to do what they are told by their minister. The manifesto is not a document to be challenged either by unelected bureaucrats, or watered down through lobbying and negotiation. It is an explicitly top-down interpretation of the Westminster model, which draws on the extensive powers located at the executive level.

The sense of frustration, and in many ways the source of the conspiratorial

view, expressed both by Benn and more latterly by Thatcher and some of her ministers, arose when they had their own interpretation of the manifesto challenged by civil servants. It appealed to a view of an overly powerful Whitehall, one capable of undermining the ability of ministers to translate the formal authority ascribed them into real power over the senior Civil Service. This was predicated on a number of arguments: the size and complexity of Whitehall, the limited tenure of ministers in office, the constraints on ministers' time, and the impact of firmly embedded 'departmental views' in conditioning the advice ministers received and a residual effect on policy formulation. Civil servants were regarded as a set of adversaries rather than allies, actively undermining the policy goals of the democratically elected government of the day.

The theme that emerges from this overview of the relationship between the Labour party and Whitehall throughout much of the twentieth century is the nature of the 'hard-wiring' of the Labour leadership's mindset when it came to issues of reform. Ramsey MacDonald established the principle that Labour had to be a constitutionalist party of government and as such should work with and not against the embedded model of the Parliamentary state. This became the default setting embraced by future Labour leadership teams up to and including the Callaghan government. They were never willing to embark on a path that questioned the parameters on which the British Parliamentary state was predicated. Thus, while throughout much of the last century the leadership of the party was receptive to specific issues of reform concerning the 'cult of the amateur', 'elitism' in Whitehall and the operational practices of particular departments such as the Treasury and the Foreign Office, no broader critique of the Westminster model and, more specifically, Whitehall was to emerge.

Instead, a predominantly benign view of the Civil Service was upheld throughout by consecutive Labour governments.

New Labour and Whitehall: pragmatism versus reform

It is not surprising that, on assuming power in 1997, a Labour government elected on a platform of radical constitutional reform sought to reassure that they were not embracing the 'conspiracy' model. The Labour government emerged from 18 years of Conservative rule and so had the same need as its predecessors to prove its respectability and trustworthiness. It therefore rejected the notion that the Civil Service was somehow politicised in a way that would lead them to be automatically antagonistic to their policies. As studies have shown elsewhere, over the next decade the government was willing to work with the permanent officials they inherited. Subsequent charges of overt politicisation during this period have little foundation.⁸

However, the Labour government was frustrated by the failure of the existing institutions of Whitehall and beyond to deliver major public services effectively. This was captured in a speech by Tony Blair after only two years in office, when he complained of having 'scars on my back' from attempts to persuade Whitehall departments to improve on policy delivery. Public servants, he implied, were concentrating on operating in 'policy chimneys', protecting their turf and their own interests rather than advancing government programmes. By 2002, the rhetoric had become more strident, with accusations of 'wreckers' in the public sector trying to undermine Labour's modernisation programme. The origins of these complaints stem, at least in part, from past failure of radical reform.

As noted above, forty years earlier, a previous Labour government had given the Fulton Inquiry a very limited remit.

Since then, the world has dramatically altered, as has the role of government, but the mindset has changed little. That debate in the 1960s, around the role and relevance of pressure group activity, demonstrated a political antagonism to the 'outside world' of political participation and a stubborn belief that effective policy making should be hermetically sealed within the realms of the relationship between elected representatives and the permanent Civil Service. It reflected a key element of the Westminster model: a belief in closed and top-down government. Since Fulton, there had been little work done by Labour—of all shades of opinion—either in Parliament, the National Executive Committee or elsewhere, to review this outlook. Moreover, after 1997, there was an assumption, expressed over the Cabinet table by Tony Blair on more than one occasion, that the government would run into a brick wall if it 'took on' the Civil Service. There is clearly a salience to the argument that if you want to move with widespread support into radical areas, you do not first take on those actually bringing the plans to fruition. The development of policy has always been the forte of the civil service, but, with some exceptions, this did not translate into changed mechanisms of delivery.

Various experienced ministers, both Labour and Conservative, have expressed a sense of frustration at what can be referred to as the 'rubber lever' syndrome. This relates to the process of fragmentation and segmentation of the state over the last three decades; the multiplying of agencies, quangos and other nondepartmental bodies, alongside the contracting-out of various service delivery tasks to the private sector. An unforeseen consequence of this trend has been that ministers in their departments do not direct in the way they used to, but instead rely on indirect management—a partial shift from command to control. A minister might pull a policy lever only to

discover later that it has not had the desired effect out there in the field.

It was not only the levers for delivery that had been compromised. Despite the managerialist agenda pursued by the previous Conservative government sceptical of the place of public service in the delivery of social policy and intent on seeing private sector management disciplines and approaches applied to the public sector, the overall culture and organisation of the Civil Service remained loyal to the spirit of Northcote-Trevelyan. Recruitment patterns and the promotion and management ladder remained much the same, as the principle of the generalist and therefore inexperienced approach prevailed. There continued to be a lack of project management and leadership skills, alongside an inadequate knowledge or experience of the world outside.

After 1997, there were specific examples of change and outlook. For example, drawing on personal experience, a number of talented individuals working in what was then the Employment Service threw heart and soul into making the early stages of the New Deal work on unprecedented timeframes. The Service itself became outward looking, a support system for getting people from welfare into work, and providing personal counselling services that had never existed before. Elsewhere, the establishment of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit in 1997 within the Department of Education and Employment (DfEE) was nothing short of a transformation. Unfortunately, it did not survive the repeated changes of Secretary of State—an indication of how the Civil Service viewed it. In short, with the agreement of the Prime Minister and Michael Bichard, who was then Permanent Secretary, Michael Barber started to recruit individuals from schools and education authorities in order to bring in a substantial amount of fresh blood with genuine hands-on experience of education. The

difference was transformational. Yet while this initiative helped in implementing education policy, in particular transforming—from early years through primary to the beginnings of secondary reform—what was actually taking place in the classroom, it had a perverse result. The government as a whole was able to avoid the central issue of radical reform of the whole machinery.

The DfEE initiative mirrored what the Prime Minister and the Chancellor were doing elsewhere: using alternative resources to side-step the civil service. Similarly, Labour improved the quality of policy making by doubling the number of political advisers working across individual departments to provide alternative sources of advice to individual ministers. In so doing, the government challenged an area in which Whitehall traditionally enjoyed a monopoly. In terms of the larger picture, however, these changes were cosmetic and masked the need to address the central issue of systemic bureaucratic reform.

Where Labour did look to reform was in identifying as outdated the view of public service that 'one size fits all'. It recognised the need to draw on the expertise and knowledge of street-level bureaucrats—the police, teachers, health care practitioners and so on—actually working out in the field with the specialised and local knowledge to address the more targeted and variable needs of the individual. The logic of this ambition was the decentralisation and devolution of decision taking and resources. This approach was first set out in the 1999 *Modernising Government* White Paper, which emphasised diversity and public services more open to people and ideas. However, its aspirations were most clearly enunciated in *Reforming Public Services: Principles into Practice* (2002) and its four principles for public service reform: *national standards* for service delivery agents, *devolution* of delivery to frontline professionals, *flexibility* through

removing bureaucratic barriers and *choice* for consumers of public services. The ambition being set for the Civil Service was to be able to change the nature of delivery and the culture in Whitehall away from legislative formulation, grand pronouncement and internalisation.

Unfortunately, the reality of securing such wholesale change would necessitate a root and branch reform of the Civil Service—one that would challenge the existing Westminster model, but which was politically unrealistic. Later, in 2005, the then Cabinet Secretary, Gus O'Donnell, was to focus on the way departments were performing when he announced a series of departmental capability reviews. The reviews would examine: departments' strategic and leadership capabilities; the running of human resources; information technology; finances; and how effectively departments engaged with key stakeholders, partners and the public. This was a commendable initiative, but not backed up by the kind of root and branch changes that might have been achieved in the early 1960s had the Fulton Committee been given the remit to look at what was happening in business and commerce, in public and voluntary services and the changing global world of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Instead, Whitehall was allowed to continue to avoid the question of real accountability, which was either devolved to agencies and intermediary tiers at regional or local level, or passed over to ministers. Ministers have had to answer for the most incompetent handling of administration. For example, as Christopher Hood and Martin Lodge observed, in 2006 alone, in the senior Civil Service 'competency has been continuously in the spotlight, from much published failures in the tax credit system, NHS financial and IT management, DEFRA farm payments, and above all Home Office administration'.⁹ And, subsequently, there has been the loss of substantial elements of data, most specta-

cularly by HM Revenue and Customs. It was of course ministers who were publicly held to account under the convention that the Civil Service is never placed in a hotter seat than a grilling in front of the Public Accounts Committee or a select committee of Parliament. Ministers survive if they keep calm and do not decide to elevate the nature of the enquiries. When they do, they become the focus, accountable and expendable.

Where has the critical agenda gone?

Despite more than a decade of a Labour government that has radically transformed certain elements of the institutional make-up of Britain, most obviously in terms of devolution, the Westminster model nevertheless continues, altered, but not fundamentally changed. What is noticeable is the absence of a substantial external critique being offered to challenge both Whitehall and more broadly the Westminster model, either from the political class or the intellectual wing of the Labour movement. As shown above, this is in contrast to previous decades. Potential exceptions could have been the offerings from Demos, with the 2004 publication of *The Dead Generalist*, or the Institute of Public Policy Research's *Whitehall's Black Box* (2006), but neither could be regarded as anything approaching a new *Apotheosis of the Dilettante* in terms of provoking further debate.

Elsewhere, informed 'Whitehall watchers' continue to meet and talk with senior civil servants, but more often than not, they reflect a Whiggish outlook by reinforcing an historic view of Whitehall. In a similar vein, *Governing Well* (2007) was published by the Better Government Initiative. The report made fifty recommendations to 'improve the quality of government's policy decisions and service delivery'. Its authors were a classic

gathering of the 'Great and the Good', dominated by former and contemporary senior civil servants. Not surprisingly, the tone of the report had something of a 'Halcyon Days' whiff about it and could be interpreted as a lament for the loss of a bygone, golden age of British politics, which failed to appreciate the contemporary realities of both politics and policy making. Collectively, these contributions reflect a view that any kind of vigorous debate on such matters is a challenge to the spirit of Northcote-Trevelyan that has to be rebutted on the grounds that it will inevitably lead to the politicisation of the Civil Service and *quelle horreur*, an American 'spoils' system or a French *cabinet* system. This is not only wrong, it is dangerous. It allows the Civil Service always to cry foul whenever a serious endeavour takes place to examine precisely what their role is in the new century, not simply in making a difference to people's lives by delivering, but in ensuring that their own jobs are invigorating, stretching and fulfilling. The best want those changes, press for them and do their best to bring them about.

The tradition of Labour diarists has also continued, with a new generation emerging of 'insiders' offering both insight and reflection on the Blair years. From within the Cabinet, Robin Cook and David Blunkett have contributed to this genre, as have the political advisers Lance Price and Alistair Campbell.¹⁰ Scattered throughout their reflections are a variety of criticisms of the machine, the way it functions and, in particular, frustration over ineffective policy delivery. Yet as with their predecessors Crossman, Castle and Benn, diaries can only provide a narrative on events as they unfold; they do not offer coherent blueprints for reform or restructuring.

One attempt from a Labour insider to provide such a commentary has come from the former Head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, Michael Barber.¹¹ What emerges from his account of

his time in Number Ten is a constant sense of frustration at the lack of power at the centre. The 'rubber lever syndrome' looms large throughout and Barber's prescription is for greater centralisation—Britain should follow the Australian model and create a new department incorporating Number Ten and the Cabinet Office. This of course runs counter to current New Labour thinking on the nature of the contemporary state and governance and its emphasis on empowering stakeholders beyond the centre through greater devolution and autonomy.

There is a final point to make on these types of publications. They all emerge after the author has left centre stage, when their ability to affect change has receded. The point here is that the practical need to forge a working relationship with Whitehall, coupled to the pressure of time when in office, compromises any potential to offer an informed, reflective and coherent mandate for reform.

The various obstacles to reforming Whitehall to make it fit-for-purpose for the twentieth century are not hard to discern. The spirit of the generalist continues to thrive.¹² The Civil Service Commission is unwilling to challenge the whole nature of how staff are recruited and managed and the disciplinary and dismissal processes, or to allow a minister to rapidly move members of senior management who are failing (with safeguards against sheer political spite). This effectively neuters politicians, no matter how good—unless, of course, they do not have direct responsibility for delivery on the ground. And there is the rub. Prime Ministers, Chancellors or, for that matter, Foreign Secretaries rarely have to trouble themselves with the issue of whether their senior civil servants are delivering in a practical sense to the British public. The Home Secretary, or ministers responsible for Health and Education or Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (where the management and delivery have been catastrophic) find themselves

falling by the wayside, while those actually responsible for the day-to-day bungling, and for inadequate policy advice, continue apace.

As those observing the political arena will be all too well aware, politicians who do not rock the boat and who, with a degree of competence, keep their head down tend to survive. Equally, those rising through the ranks of the permanent Civil Service, learn pretty much the same lessons. Unfortunately, this was reinforced by Tony Blair's decision (again perfectly understandable in terms of political statecraft) not to take hold of and transform the top appointments procedure in Whitehall, in particular when it came to the replacement of the retiring Cabinet Secretary in 1998. Here was an opportunity to use the enormous Labour majority to protect the government from the seismic traumas that would have undoubtedly hit it in the period before it was understood that this would not be an attack on political neutrality, an attempt to impose politicisation or to second guess the management of the Service. A number in the Cabinet wanted reform. Looking back, it is indeed ironic that those who sought to reform within their own bailiwick may unwittingly have contributed to putting off the day when serious root and branch reform would take place across the whole of the Service.

Conclusion: The need for a future debate

Getting reform right will involve a clear analysis of what is and should be decentralised and devolved, who is to be held to account at a level commensurate with that devolvement, by whom, and what mechanisms exist for verifying the results. There has to be a clear understanding of who answers for what at national level, how the executive can be held to account for the decisions taken and the part that policy decisions make in

the effectiveness and success of delivery. The role that rightly falls to the leadership and management of the professional administrative civil service must be determined, together with those who have the power to appropriately and effectively hold them to account in a meaningful, transparent and honest manner.

Unfortunately, it appears that the recent draft bill *The Governance of Britain: Constitutional Renewal* (2008) will prove to be another terrible missed opportunity. It entrenches everything that has been seen to be beneficial in relation to an independent Civil Service, but without any of the reforming measures that would make it a real and effective organ of government in the twenty-first century. It continues a long tradition of the political class—both ministers and civil servants—operating as staunch defenders of the key principles of the Westminster model and protecting their asymmetric position of power within the broader policy-making arena.¹³

The bill reinforces the role of the Civil Service Commission to fortify the traditions of Whitehall. Why is the Civil Service Commission not being radically altered to take account of the intervening century since Northcote–Trevelyan? The key values of the Civil Service, as set out on the face of the draft bill, do not include competence, efficiency or commitment to delivery. So they omit a relationship with the consumer, those for whom the Civil Service are, in the end, working. The bill upholds ‘the core principle of recruitment on merit’. It considers merit to be formulaic, not based on actual demonstrable delivery. It protects the principle of ‘open competition’ and makes it less likely that officials will be promoted in post. This reinforces the principle of the generalist in a world where expertise is crucial. It refers to the role of the Civil Service Minister—and in relation to the Diplomatic Service, the Foreign Secretary—in terms that describe them as

‘managing’ the Civil Service. It indicates, albeit unwittingly, a gross misunderstanding of the fact that ministers do not ‘manage’ Whitehall at all—and therefore have no real power or accountability (while at the same time carrying responsibility for what they do).

The government appears to have learnt little about the critical nature of reform of the Civil Service after over a decade in office. Partly this can be explained by the assumption that this is a matter for the Civil Service. For its part, the government assumed that the Public Administration Select Committee would provide alternative scenarios, but it did not. Yet this ignores a much more fundamental point that goes beyond debates over trying to improve on the existing technocratic or managerialist organisational structures. The theme of Whitehall reform goes right to the heart of much broader questions concerning the core ideas underpinning what the Labour party stands for, how best to deliver on its social democratic aspirations and, in turn, what sort of model is most effective for forging a truly ‘enabling state’. Does sustaining the Westminster model of government—a model forged in a bygone era—remain the only option left?

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Notes

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