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Leadership in the British Civil Service

An Interpretation

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Abstract

This article is essentially a polemic. The argument is that when politicians and officials now talk of 'leadership' in the British civil service they do not use that word in the way in which it was previously used. In the past leading civil servants, acting in partnership with ministers and within constitutional constraints, exercised leadership in the sense of setting example, inspiring confidence and encouraging loyalty. The loosening of traditional constitutional patterns, the marginalization of senior officials in the policy process and the emergence of business methods as the preferred model for public administration have led to a political and administrative environment in which leadership in the British civil service is now about encouraging patterns of behaviour which fit in with these changes. Leadership skills are now about 'delivery'; they are not about motivation. It is time for politicians, officials and scholars to be open about this.

Keywords Britain, civil service, leadership

Leadership is a hurrah word. Like democracy and efficiency it attracts widespread support; however, again as with democracy and efficiency, it cannot easily be taught. Its meaning can be different in different contexts and different circumstances. It is a term capable of various definitions and can be used to justify a wide variety of actions. All these general comments apply in both public administration and in management in other contexts, but this article will consider its relevance in

the public sector and, in particular, consider how it may be best appreciated in the British civil service in the early years of the 21st century.

In discussions about leadership in the British civil service there has been continuity in the attitudes of politicians from the latter years of the Thatcher premiership into the years of the Blair premiership. This can be seen in the *Next Steps* report (Efficiency Unit, 1988). It said that many people had told the scrutiny that ‘too few senior civil servants showed the qualities of leadership which would be expected from top managers in organisations outside the Civil Service’ (Appendix B, para. 25). The report focused on some main problems which, it said, needed ‘Leadership, and commitment to change from Ministers and the Senior Civil Service if they are to be dealt with’ (para. 150). Indeed, ‘senior managers ... must be prepared to show real qualities of leadership, the ability to back their judgment and to take and defend unpopular decisions’ (para. 35). In more recent times the *Modernising Government* Report said ‘We must ... move away from the risk-averse culture inherent in government’ (Prime Minister, 1999, para. 6[6]), and ‘remove unnecessary bureaucracy which prevents public servants from experimenting, innovating and delivering a better product’ (para. 6[7]). It stressed that ‘All this requires strong leadership from the top and from all public service managers’ (para. 6[40]). In fact, in the British political system, this requires much thought and preparation if the leadership expectations are to be accommodated and implemented. Public servants after all work in a political environment constrained by the requirements of democracy, primary amongst them being the need for accountability.

Leadership in the British Civil Service in the Past

Traditionally, and as explained by Sir Ivor Jennings, the most essential characteristic of the British civil service ‘is the responsibility of the minister for every act done in his department’ (Jennings, 1936, 1959 edn, p. 499). Jennings also said, ‘The act of every civil servant is by convention regarded as the act of his minister’ (Jennings, 1933, 1952 edn, pp. 189–90). Herbert Morrison put the position clearly when he wrote that ‘the Minister is responsible for every stamp stuck on an envelope’ (cited in Marshall, 1989, p. 7).

One of the consequences of this constitutional position, a position formalized in the statement on ministerial responsibility by Sir David Maxwell-Fyfe in 1954, is that the executive arrangements in British government are bureaucratic – that is, consistent with the characteristics of an ideal bureaucracy as outlined by Max Weber (Maxwell-Fyfe, 1954; Weber, 1947, pp. 329–36). There is a hierarchy of accountability from the most junior civil servants through their superiors up to, eventually, the permanent secretary and from the permanent secretary to ministers who are answerable to Parliament and its committees. Then, not less frequently than once every five years, the Government is answerable to the people, at a general election. This is what is generally known as representative democracy. The system is, however, more complex than at first appears and, particularly in the late 20th

and early 21st centuries, it has led to increasingly complex arrangements to ensure that the accountability of officials is clear when they are engaged in implementing government policies.¹

When Jennings was writing ministers were answerable to Parliament and its committees; officials did not personally defend their actions in Parliament, but they were defended there by ministers. In committees (such as the Estimates Committee and the Public Accounts Committee) ministers also defended the work of their departments, but often civil servants were called to account for their work. In the second half of the 20th century the parliamentary system became increasingly complex, with the creation of specialist select committees. Progressively, it was recognized that officials should defend themselves when detailed matters of policy implementation were under consideration. Officials, after all, filled out the details of policy and managed policies. Indeed, it was here that their expertise was in more demand; it was here that leadership opportunities were most evident; and ministers who held particular offices for only short periods were not normally as well informed about policy details as their permanent officials whose working lives were dedicated to public service.

Constitutional adjustments were therefore made in practice and reinterpretations were accommodated. The ultimate sanction available to the Public Accounts Committee was to surcharge officials, but in practice this sanction was not used after 1919 (Brittan, 1964, p. 80). This did not mean, however, that Parliament, its select committees and other inquiries were ineffective. A specific example of how the system worked was illustrated by the Crichel Down case. In that situation officials were carrying out the government policy of encouraging the development of best farming practice through the creation of model farms. Difficulties arose in the early 1950s when the new Conservative Government did not make its policies sufficiently clearly known to the officials, and when the enthusiastic application of the policy being implemented conflicted with the interests of particular farmers. Following a public inquiry, Mr Melford Stephenson, the Recorder for Rye, said that in the Crichel Down case, the civil servants 'derived great satisfaction from the exercise of personal power which they were able to wield at the expense of somebody else's pocket'. He declared that 'There is a time ... when the public administrator can become, if not drunk, unfit to be in charge of his personal power' (cited in Brown, 1955, p. 102). Just as there is often a fine line between policy and administration, there may also be a fine line between the display of leadership in public administration and exceeding powers that should be constrained by the political environment.

There are constitutional, political and practical checks that restrain the abuse of powers, whether or not the motivation is to exercise leadership. Two of these checks are mentioned here. In 1970, Sir William Armstrong, the Head of the Home Civil Service, was questioned about his personal attitude to exercising the considerable power he had. In answer, he explained that for him being answerable to oneself was the greatest taskmaster. He added: 'I am accountable to my own ideal

of a civil servant' (cited in Chapman, 1970, p. 141). A second example of a check on leadership by civil servants was given by R.W.L. Wilding, when in charge of the Management Group in the Civil Service Department. He gave his personal view of the professional ethic of the administrator. He said it was necessary to distinguish energy from commitment: 'it is absolutely necessary to pursue today's policy with energy; it is almost equally necessary in order to survive, to withhold from it the last ounce of commitment' (Wilding, 1979, p. 184).

Nevertheless there has been considerable scope for leadership to be exercised by civil servants: it is a form of leadership, however, that is consistent with the constraints as well as with the opportunities of work in the civil service. One way in which civil servants have demonstrated leadership in the constitutional context is by the standards they set and by the quality of decisions they make. Edward Bridges, for example, was particularly sensitive to the expectations for fairness and justice in the decisions he made. He set high standards for himself and expected similarly high standards in others. A specific example of this was the memorandum he issued to all civil servants after the Crichel Down Inquiry reported. The issue of such a memorandum from the Head of the Civil Service was a rare event, but Bridges felt that it was consistent with the accountability he had as Head of the Civil Service. He emphasized the need for civil servants to constantly bear in mind that the citizen had a right to expect that his personal feelings, no less than his rights as an individual, would be sympathetically and fairly considered, and he quoted from the report of the inquiry chaired by Sir Warren Fisher into the irregularities revealed by the Francs case which said that 'The public expects from Civil Servants a standard of integrity and conduct not only inflexible but fastidious'. Bridges ended his memorandum by saying: 'It will do no harm if each one of us goes over the ground himself, and makes sure there is nothing amiss' (cited in Chapman, 1988, p. 276).

Edward Bridges achieved a position of leadership in the British civil service by his industry, his mastery of the art of (public) administration, by the high standards he set himself, and by being regarded by others as an example to be followed. So outstanding was his example, and so well established was his personal authority, that he could even call ministers in to tell them when they were behaving badly, as sometimes they were (Chapman, 1988, p. 307). The standard being set and the leadership roles being demonstrated were, however, not developed by training programmes or codes of conduct but by processes of socialisation and personal conduct. Sir John Winnifrith recalled Bridges' influence and said of him that 'There were no directions, very few written instructions, but the word passed – all the quicker because it was not written – and all concerned knew what they had to do and what was expected of them' (Winnifrith, 1970, p. 15).

The traditional approach to successful leadership in the British civil service looks in two directions. On the one hand, it relates to other civil servants who regard particular individuals as leaders because of their positions at the top of a hierarchy, combined with the esteem in which they are held by other officials.

On the other hand, it relates to the wider context, the political and constitutional context, in which senior civil servants work. It is in this context that civil servants and ministers inter-relate and develop criteria for recognizing particular people as leaders. Ministers can recognize civil service leaders and civil servants can recognize ministerial leaders. Rarely does an individual emerge with as much high regard as a leader as Edward Bridges. Indeed, so significant was his role that in 1954 he wrote what became the definitive statement on ministerial responsibility – written at the request of the prime minister but delivered in Parliament by the Home Secretary, Sir David Maxwell Fyfe (quoted in Chapman, 1988, p. 276).

Ministers and Civil Servants: Partners in Leadership

There is little doubt that civil servants in the past exercised considerable influence on public affairs, and in that sense could be regarded as having been 'leaders'. Indeed, there is some impressive scholarship on the subject (see for example, Barberis, 1996; Chapman, 1984, 1988, 2004; O'Halpin, 1989; Theakston, 1999). However, the kind of 'leadership' these past public servants exercised was quite different from that expected today. As noted earlier, they did so with a strict understanding of the constitutional, political and practical limitations on their authority. In particular, 'administrative leadership' was constrained by the fact that ministers exercised 'political leadership', including over their departments. Seen from the other side of the minister–civil servant relationship, this is well illustrated by Herbert Morrison (1954) in his illuminating book, *Government and Parliament*. He devotes a whole chapter to 'Ministers and Civil Servants' in which he outlines the relationship, delineating the various responsibilities of each party and concludes that

the relationship between Ministers and civil servants should be – and usually is – that of colleagues working together in a team, cooperative partners seeking to advance the public interest and the efficiency of the Department ... The partnership should be alive and virile, rival ideas and opinions should be fairly considered, and the relationship of all should be one of mutual respect – on the understanding, of course, that the Minister's decision is final and must be loyally and helpfully carried out, and that he requires efficient and energetic service. (Morrison, 1954, pp. 318–19)

He emphasizes throughout that the minister is in charge, that he takes the important decisions and that he is answerable publicly and in Parliament for everything that is done in the Department.

In essence, Morrison was describing a relationship that was one of partnership, but a partnership dictated by the requirements of accountability in a democracy. As Graham Wallas put it in 1908,

The real 'Second Chamber', the real 'constitutional check' ... is provided ... by the existence of a permanent Civil Service, appointed on a system independent of the opinion and/or desires of any politician ... English civil servants ... have the right and duty of

making their voice heard, without the necessity of making their will, by fair means or foul prevail. (Wallas, 1908, 1920 edn, p. 257)

Sir Warren Fisher, widely recognized as a real leader of the civil service, put it more emphatically:

As English politics gets increasingly Americanised, we shall find Ministers more and more disposed to do shady things – and the Civil Servants of that day will have to possess the courage to say to their political chiefs ‘That is a damned swindle, sir, and you can’t do it’. (quoted in O’Toole, 2006, p. 77)

His view was that ‘The presentation of integrity, fearlessness, and independence of thought and utterance in their private communion with Ministers ... is an essential principle in enlightened Government’ (Tomlin, 1931, p. 1268, para. 12).

Herbert Morrison would have been likely to agree with these sentiments. More prosaically, however, he also emphasizes the need in the relationship between ministers and civil servants for the proper minuting of decisions, a subject to which he devotes three pages. Minuting, he argues, is part of ‘the price for parliamentary democracy’ (Morrison, 1954, p. 316). ‘Decisions may well tend to be slower than in private business concerns where they can be well reached even without records by the man on the spot, or as a result of a quick telephone conversation’. However, parliamentarians may ask questions or take other action in Parliament, querying or challenging any government department; therefore, ‘proper records must be kept so that it might be ascertained what decision was reached, why, and by whom’. Moreover,

it is also desirable to have such records for departmental reasons: in case the Minister or his civil servants should forget what decision was reached; to encourage care and responsibility in reaching decisions; and so that everybody (including the Minister) is committed and responsibility cannot well be shifted, which is only fair to everyone concerned. (Morrison, 1954, pp. 315–16)

The 2004 Butler Report into intelligence gathering prior to the Iraq War provides ample evidence of why such considerations are important (Butler, 2004a). Lord Butler referred to the approaches adopted by the Blair administration as ‘sofa government’ (2004b). One of his main criticisms, indeed, was that the informal nature of decision-making in relation to the Iraq war ‘made it much more difficult for members of the Cabinet outside the small circle directly involved to bring their political judgement and experience to bear on the major decisions for which the Cabinet as a whole must carry responsibility’. This, he argued, had ‘lessened the support of the machinery of government for the collective responsibility of the Cabinet’ (Butler, 2004a, paras 609–10).

These observations are, of course, directly related to the intelligence about the Iraq war; but Lord Butler was concerned with a more general situation in which decisions are confined to small groups of directly involved ministers and officials meeting informally and apparently without minute takers. He thought this inimi-

cal to collective decision making and to the effective coordination of government activities (Butler, 2004b). Such approaches seem to have evolved because the government believed that 'business practices' are more efficient for the dispatch of government activities. They sit easily with the 'can-do' approach adopted by Margaret Thatcher, a view of government as if it were indeed a business. The niceties of consultation, discussion, recording – all factors in the traditional style of public administration as described by Morrison, and all necessary for the political leadership of ministers in British government – are apparently inimical to the efficiency of government. The relationship between ministers and civil servants has fundamentally changed.

Nowhere is this more clearly evidenced than by Tony Blair himself in a speech he made about public service reform in 2004 to a 'Civil Service Reform Event' hosted by the then Head of the Civil Service, Sir Andrew Turnbull (Prime Minister, 2004). Surprisingly, the then Prime Minister's first comments were in praise of the Northcote Trevelyan Report of 1854, a report that had encouraged the 'enduring values' that had 'underpinned' the civil service. 'Those values', he said, 'of integrity, impartiality and merit have proved timeless and are a decisive legacy of Gladstone and his officials'. He went on to say that the civil service 'has strengths that are priceless. The greatest is indeed its integrity'. Moreover, it is not just the 'lofty ideals of integrity and political impartiality' that are the hallmarks of the civil service. It has the 'ability to master complex negotiations not just with attention to detail but sublime skill', abilities that the Prime Minister had witnessed and 'been grateful for' on many occasions. The service 'provides expert advice, intelligently crafted and usually utterly sensitive to political reality'. These are all sentiments that Morrison some 60 years ago would have wholeheartedly supported, and which sit easily with a view of the civil service as the supporters and advisers of ministers in their public duties.

What follows, however, is a series of comments that reveal that Blair was totally out of sympathy with such a view, and his complete belief that the private sector is better than the public sector. This can be seen even in the apparent praise heaped upon civil servants, 'the calibre' of whom is 'enormously high; *in many respects every bit as good as their private sector counterparts*' (emphasis added). He argued that the challenge was to sustain the Gladstonian values he apparently lauded while bringing about 'the radical transformation our times demand' so that public services could meet 'consumer expectations'. What he sought was the creation of an 'Enabling Government', helping people to help themselves. Government would become 'an instrument of empowerment'. The civil service was unresponsive to the increasing consumerism of society and its focus should shift from 'policy advice' (the very strength the Prime Minister referred to earlier in his speech) to 'delivery', by which he meant:

Outcomes. It means project management. It means adapting to new situations and altering rules and practices accordingly. It means not working in traditional departmental silos. It means working naturally with partners outside government. It's not that many

individual civil servants aren't capable of this. It is that doing it requires a change of operation and of culture that goes to the core of the civil service.

This is to be achieved 'By changing the law; by innovating; by setting targets; by leadership; by focussing on results'.

The then Prime Minister recognized that one of the obstacles to the emergence of a new breed of civil servant, 'more entrepreneurial ... more adventurous like their private sector counterparts', is politicians themselves, who seek vast amounts of information and prevent civil servants from taking risks. Politicians, he argued, should be accountable, but 'sometimes we can be so frightened by the process of accountability, we opt for inertia'. Nevertheless, the civil service and civil servants in the future should display the following characteristics, characteristics that had enabled many successful examples of policy initiatives:

A sense of ambition, including crucially the belief that apparently intractable problems can be solved; a relentless focus on outcomes; clarity including the application of programme and project management techniques that have transformed business; urgency including finding out quickly what's working and what isn't and adapting accordingly; and finally seeing things through until change is irreversible.

In an accompanying document, published by the Cabinet Office, details emerged about how the Prime Minister's vision was to come about. In essence, it would depend on 'visible leadership' from the most senior officials in government (Cabinet Office, 2004, para. 5.2).

Leadership in the Civil Service Now

As noted in the introduction to this article, leadership is a nebulous concept, which can mean different things to different people at different times. It is clear that what is meant by leadership now in the British civil service is not about traditional modes of encouragement, support and morale boosting – an almost military concept, befitting an institution that one of its great past leaders regarded as 'the fourth service of the Crown' (see O'Halpin, 1989; O'Toole, 2006, pp. 74–9). It is rather about equipping civil servants for new roles, roles summarised in one word, 'delivery'. This is encapsulated both in the Senior Civil Service Top Leadership Programme and in the most recent civil service reform initiatives emanating from the Cabinet Office, or that part of it called the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, the so called 'Capability Reviews' (see Cabinet Office, 2006; Horton, 2007; Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, 2006a,b, 2007). These reviews will apparently lead to a civil service which 'is better at delivering public services', one of the three aims being to 'assure the public and ministers that the Civil Service leadership is equipped to develop and deliver departmental strategies'.

'Leadership' is thus at the very centre of the reviews, the Cabinet Office raising 'key questions that test current capability', which essentially define what is meant by leadership for this purpose under four headings. Leadership is about

setting direction, igniting passion, pace and drive, taking responsibility for leading delivery and change, and building capacity' (Cabinet Office, 2006). Sir Gus O'Donnell, the current Head of the Civil Service, is in the vanguard of these processes, exercising the 'visible leadership' referred to earlier. Indeed, no doubt in his capacity as the 'leader' of the civil service, he has set out 'Gus' Vision' for the civil service, a vacuous statement reminiscent of a similar theme published by Sir Richard Wilson, one of O'Donnell's predecessors as leader of the civil service, in a document entitled *Vision and Values* (Cabinet Office, 1999). Wilson's vision was of a civil service that was the best at everything it does (para. 6). O'Donnell's vision is 'for a civil service that exudes pride, pace, passion and professionalism' with core values of 'honesty, objectivity, integrity and impartiality', all of these elements of the vision bound together 'in a diverse civil service' (O'Donnell, 2006a). To reinforce the vision, the first ever civil service awards ceremony was held in November 2006, precisely to celebrate 'the pride, pace, passion and professionalism demonstrated by teams and individuals ... who have made a real difference to people's lives'. In October 2006 there were also the first ever civil service 'Diversity and Equality Awards'.

O'Donnell expanded on the themes of his 'vision' in a speech delivered to a Public Service Reform conference in June 2006, in which he said his objective was to create 'a culture of excellence', which would involve in practice ensuring that, 'the Civil Service is admired worldwide for the quality of its policy advice'. It would also 'deliver world class, customer focused services' and be 'relentlessly customer focused'. All this means 'thinking in a new way', and being 'responsive and flexible'. These challenges require 'the best talent at all levels' and 'excellent leadership at all levels'. At the top, it is 'no longer enough for senior leaders to be focussed on just their own areas', they must 'ensure that, within and between departments, leaders focus on delivering final outcomes, not just their own, often intermediate targets' (O'Donnell, 2006b). The capability reviews are essentially one component of the means by which O'Donnell's 'vision' can be implemented, and at the time of writing 15 departmental capability reviews had been conducted, covering nearly 80 per cent of the civil service.

One of the core themes to have emerged from the reviews themselves is 'Leadership from the centre' (see Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, 2006a, pp. 14–17, 2006b, pp. 7–8, 2007, pp. 29–35). Indeed, leadership seems to be Theme 1, because 'great leadership is central to strengthening capability' (Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, 2006b, p. 7). Leadership, however, seems largely to be a matter of what might be called corporate governance. This can be seen in the various measures that have been taken to strengthen the leadership capacity throughout the civil service, including, for example: implementing a 'new leadership framework for the Senior Civil Service', in which 'All Senior Civil Service staff are assessed against common and challenging standards for leadership'; developing 'a clear corporate role for the "top 200" leaders in the Civil Service' (the cross civil service leadership group); and starting 'to produce a comprehensive People

Strategy for the Civil Service' (Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, 2006b, p. 8). More widely, O'Donnell has set up 'streamlined governance arrangements for the Civil Service with a quarterly Permanent Secretaries Management Group meeting to discuss civil service wide issues' and a smaller Civil Service Steering Board, which addresses 'key challenges' identified by a series of sub-groups (Cabinet Office, 2006). The civil service has also launched 'Leaders Unlimited', a corporate development programme aimed at realizing the management potential of women, black and minority ethnic staff, and staff with disabilities.

Much of this is eminently laudable, especially since, rather than being about leadership it is more about equipping the civil service for the skills ministers now require of it. What they require are essentially technical skills, skills to be developed for the purpose of delivering public policies. This reflects complex changes in the way in which government is conducted in this country. In particular, there has been a downgrading of the civil service as part of the apparatus of policy making. Ministers no longer require the traditional skills for which senior civil servants had an excellent reputation, and which the civil service prior to the 1980s valued above all else. The former Prime Minister's assertions about the Gladstonian tradition, and the aspiration of the current Head of the Civil Service to make the civil service world class in this respect, are meaningless. The increasing reverence for business like methods, the ever present influence of special advisers and policy Czars, the exponential growth of think tanks, policy units, and other non-government sources of advice, have combined to contribute to the marginalization of civil servants in the policy process (for further discussion about these matters see O'Toole, 2006, Chapter 5). In these circumstances, it is not leadership that is being developed in the civil service; it is what might be labelled 'public entrepreneurship'. The skills required are risk taking, ambition, focus on outcomes, and all the other attributes associated with business ventures. The changes being wrought in consequence of the Capability Reviews and the wider efficiency strategy and civil service reform programme are designed to create the conditions in which this can come about. The irony is that the measures being taken, especially the corporate governance changes, are more likely to be stifling to the development of such skills.

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One of the Public Administration Select Committee's recent reports is essentially about the Capability Reviews. The Committee asserts that all departments of government are not 'fit for purpose', to use the ugly phrase that has recently acquired currency (Public Administration Select Committee, 2007, para. 27). Part of this they attribute to a lack of leadership, citing a recent survey of the Senior Civil Service indicating that more than half felt their 'top team' not to be providing effective leadership (para. 29). 'Confident leadership', the Committee asserts, 'is needed to allow civil servants to carry out their constitutional duty to tell truth to power' (para. 30). This exhortation has come too late. The trouble with the

Committee's analysis is that the purpose of the civil service has shifted – Fisher, Bridges and their colleagues did 'speak truth unto power', and they did so because that was how they saw their constitutional duty. More importantly, it was how those in positions of political power saw the duty of civil servants. This was part of the remit of senior officials as policy advisers in what used to be called the higher civil service. As senior officials have been marginalized it is not surprising that leadership of this sort has declined. The Public Administration Select Committee is living in the past if it really thinks that the traditional role of senior officials has survived. The problem is, and this is identified, if accidentally, by the Committee itself, that the civil service is not now really capable of becoming what ministers (and apparently the Committee itself) want it to be. In the process of change the civil service has become, in the phrase Alexander Pope used to describe the advisers to the monarch in his time, an 'amphibious thing':

Whether in florid impotence he speaks
And, as the prompter speaks the puppet squeaks
...
Amphibious thing! that acting either part,
The trifling head or the corrupted heart
Fop at the toilet, flatt'rer at the board
Now trips a lady, and now struts a Lord
(Pope, 1734, 1933 edn, p. 125)

Pope was referring in this passage to John, Lord Hervey, a Vice Chamberlain at the Court of George II, and confidential adviser to Queen Caroline. Sporus, the pseudonym Pope used to protect himself, was a eunuch acolyte of the Emperor Nero. The civil service of the present time has suffered the same fate as that of poor Sporus: it has been neutered. The call from the Public Administration Committee for the equivalent of a National Audit Office to investigate civil service performance is quite irrelevant in this context (Public Administration Select Committee, 2007, para. 127).

There are superficial signs that the new administration led by Gordon Brown might be inclined to a more traditional view of the relationship between ministers and their officials. For example, one of Brown's first acts as Prime Minister was to withdraw the 1997 Order in Council that gave management powers to a limited number of special advisers (Prime Minister, 2007, col. 817). This symbolic act seems to have been reinforced by the reluctance of new ministers to make important announcements except in Parliament. Gordon Brown himself devoted his first major speech in Parliament to constitutional reform, and emphasized in particular reinforcing the neutrality of the civil service and removing from the discretion of the executive the core values governing it (Prime Minister, 2007, col. 817). This may even take the form of a Civil Service Act, long called for by the Public Administration Select Committee and the Committee on Standards in Public Life (for further discussion, see O'Toole, 2006, pp. 175–80). This will be

in addition to significant changes in *The Ministerial Code* (Cabinet Office, 2007). These changes together could mark a shift in the way leadership is regarded under the new government. It may even be that the idea of ministerial responsibility might re-emerge as one of the fundamental mechanisms by which government is managed.

It is also the case, however, that the new Prime Minister has indicated his commitment to public service reform, continuing the processes begun by his predecessor. It may be that the qualities sought in civil servants to deliver reforms will be exactly as previously expected – and, as hoped for in the 1988 *Next Steps* report and subsequently. Civil servants may now display ‘real qualities of leadership’ and ‘take and defend unpopular decisions’. They are becoming risk takers, adventurers and public entrepreneurs. In other words, in the period since the *Next Steps* report, the administrative culture may have changed in ways that render meaningless the intentions of the formal changes proposed by the Brown Ministry. Ministers are in charge, but there is now little counterweight from the civil service. The leadership partnership has gone. Leadership in the civil service, as previously understood, is irrelevant. It is time for politicians, officials and scholars to be open about this.

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Note

1. Derived, for example, from the 1980 Osmotherly rules for civil servants giving evidence to parliamentary committees, the 1985 Armstrong Memorandum on the duties and responsibilities of civil servants in relation to Ministers, the Financial Management Initiative of the 1980s and the changing roles of accounting officers in consequence of the Next Steps process.

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