

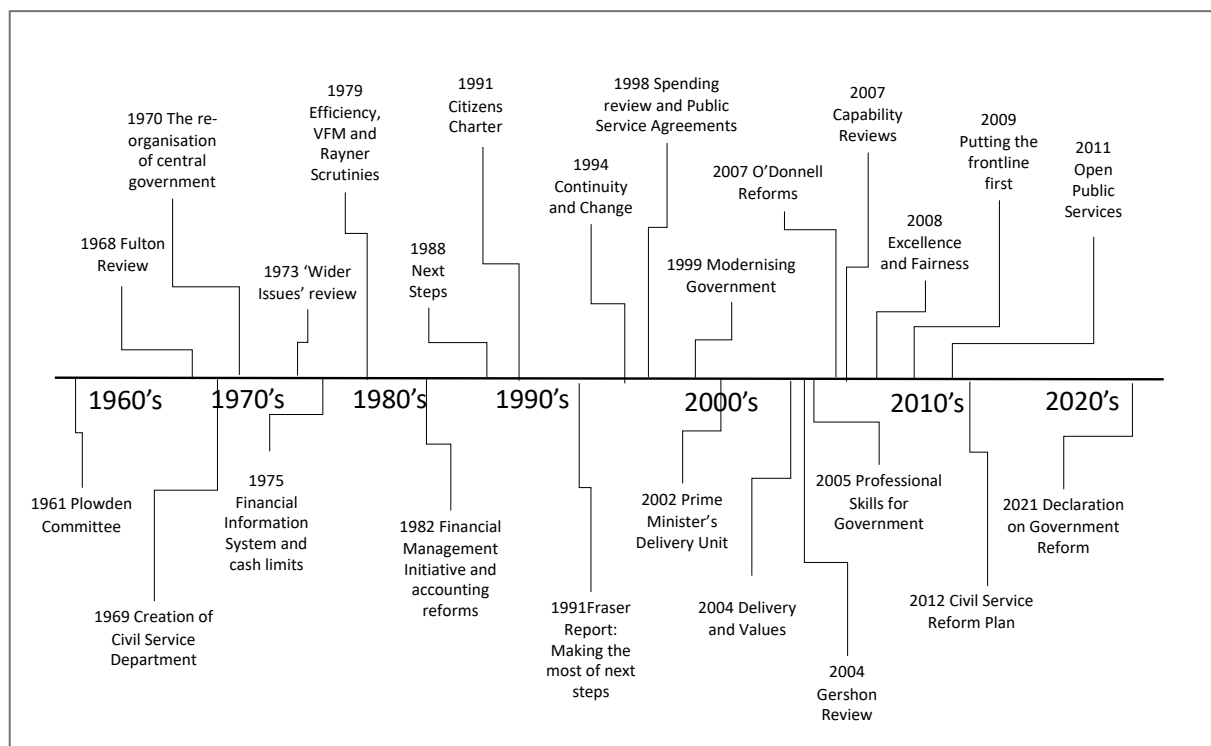
Timelines and impetus

1. An endless cycle of reforms

The UK is probably the world’s most relentless reformer of civil service management. It is an international outlier due in part to the flexibility of the UK system of government and in particular the ability of prime ministers to make big changes without passing laws. The most far reaching UK reform- the Next Steps Agencies - was driven through by Thatcher unaided by a single statute. (Pollitt, 2013c).

Over the last 65 years there have been at least 30 significant pulses of reform efforts addressing civil service management. Within those I have identified over 160 distinctive new or continuing reform elements.

Exhibit 1. 65 years of UK civil service reforms



Source: Analysis by Peter Thomas

Civil service reform is *'Deliberate attempts to change the structures, processes, and/or cultures of public sector organisations with the objective of getting them (in some senses) to run better'* (Pollitt, 2017). This definition locates reform as a largely managerial effort within the institution that is the Civil Service.

Whilst the definition is inherently managerialist, the last 65 years of reform illustrate how the notion of civil service reform has been overloaded with demands for better government that

are too often beyond the realm of improved management. In 2016 Pollitt (2016) looked back on the evolution of public management research in what became his valedictory article. He observed that successive models of reform in the UK since the 1960's hold *'the underlying belief that it is managers who are the key to a transformed public sector... they are the focal point not politicians or frontline staff... managers make things tick.'* His conclusion is striking: *'managerialism is not enough, managers cannot restore fiscal balance, cannot save the welfare state and are certainly not the primary guardians of democracy.'* Such challenges demand courageous political and policy choices.

2. The impetus for reforms? White Papers, reviews, and rhetoric

The impetus for civil service reforms as seen through landmark reviews, white papers and reform plans has been remarkably consistent. The same core themes run through these landmark reform statements: cutting costs, controlling expenditure, modern methods, new skills, stronger accountability for officials, transparency of spending, value for money, openness, professionalism, coordination across government and beyond, strategic direction, prioritisation and planning, strengthening the centre, using new technology, management information, open recruitment and promotion, better management of programmes and projects, delivering results, and a smaller civil service that only does what it must. From Major onwards the scope of reform widened to look at management across the wider public sector through the eyes of partners, customers and citizens – a more outward looking approach that continued under Blair and Brown.

These patterns are illustrated below by representative extracts from eight landmark reform reports that span the last 6 decades. The extracts are selected to give the best view of the rationale for reform – sometimes expressed as problems to be solved, at other times as broader ambitions to be achieved:

1968: Fulton Review: *'[the civil service] is inadequate... for the most efficient discharge of the present and prospective responsibilities of government: It is still too much based on the philosophy of the amateur (or "generalist" or "all-rounder")... [it] has not recruited enough specialists ... many have received inadequate training (or none at all) in techniques of modern management. ...Too few civil servants are skilled managers... There is not enough contact between the Service and the community it is there to serve. ...There is a lack of confidence in the treasury as the centre of civil service management. ...government departments need a structure in which units and individual members had authority that is clearly defined and responsibilities for which they can be held accountable... to which costs can be precisely allocated... long term policy-planning and research tend to take second place... Civil servants are... organised in a large number of separate classes, almost all with their own different grading and career structures. ...[this] is a major obstacle to the proper application of the principles of accountable management... The administrative process is surrounded by too much secrecy. (Fulton, 1968)*

1970: Heath's re-organisation of central government: *'Government has been attempting to do too much... This has... overloaded the government machine... weakness has shown itself in the apparatus of policy formulation and in the quality of many government decisions over the last 25 years... [the] structure of inter-departmental committees need to be reinforced by a clear*

and comprehensive definition of ... government strategy which can provide a framework within which the Government's policies as a whole may be more effectively formulated... [we will combine] functions in [new] departments with a wide span to provide a series of fields of unified policy... there should be a capability at the centre for analysis... [and a] radical improvement in the information system available to ministers... (Cmnd 4506, 1970)

1981: Thatcher's Financial Management Initiative. *A sense of responsibility for achieving value for money must be widely disseminated in the government service. [the] Financial Management Initiative [aims] to improve the allocation, management and control of resources throughout central government. It is not the accounting system itself that is crucial, but the discipline of breaking down a department's activity between managers, whose responsibilities can thus be more clearly distinguished and objectives more clearly defined; whose costs and outputs can be more clearly assessed; and to whom greater authority can then be delegated to choose the best way of using the resources allocated to them in pursuit of the defined objectives... Better information is of little value without effective arrangements to handle it or the skilled managers to use it. So one essential feature of [departmental] plans is the development or improvement of departmental machinery for the regular review of administrative and programme expenditures, their objectives and the resource devoted to them and their success. Another is the progressive training and development of managers at all levels so that they possess and use all the appropriate skills of financial management. (HC 236, 1982)(Cmnd 9058, 1983)*

1988: Thatcher's Next Steps Scrutiny: *There is insufficient sense of urgency in the search for better value for money and steadily improving services... substantial further improvement is achievable, but that this depends heavily on changing the cultural attitudes and behaviour of government so that continuous improvement becomes a widespread and in-built feature of it. Middle managers in particular feel that their authority is seriously circumscribed both by unnecessary controls and by the intervention of ministers and senior officials in relatively minor issues... senior management is dominated by people... who have relatively little experience of managing or working where services are actually being delivered. ...top management is dominated by the policy and political support tasks... responsibilities for management at the top of departments are unclear. ... whilst the introduction of management systems [PES] has helped make civil servants cost conscious there is less consciousness about results... the PES system gave the wrong signals... the emphasis was on inputs, not outputs or value for money... Most pressures on government are to spend money, not to get good value from it. ...Central units pursue their own initiatives without regard to departments' own priorities... sometimes messages from the centre conflicted... the centre's reliance on detailed control of the way departments organised and managed themselves was totally at odd with the principles of good, delegated management as set out in the FMI... central rules were acting as a constraint on good management and taking away their scope to do things which would be sensible in terms of their own organisation. (Jenkins et al., 1988)*

1991 Major's Citizen's Charter white paper *Giving more power to the citizens... they are entitled to expect high quality services, responsive to their needs, provided efficiently... people's right to be informed and choose for themselves... we need to increase choice and competition... but also develop other ways of ensuring good standards of service. [citizens charter] is a toolkit of initiatives and ideas to raise standards in the way most appropriate to each service... more*

privatisation, wider competition, further contracting out, more performance related pay, published performance targets both local and national, comprehensive publication of information on standards achieved, more effective complains procedures, tougher and more independent inspectorates, better redress for the citizen when services go badly wrong. ...[the charter] applies to all public services... it is about finding better ways of converting the money that can be afforded into even better services.(CM 1599, 1991)

1999: Blair's Modernising Government white paper: *'People want government which meets their needs, which is available when they need it, and which delivers results for them... public services can be organized too much around the structure of the providers rather than the users... The system is too often risk averse... slow to take advantage of new opportunities... too little effort has gone into making sure that policies are devised and delivered in a consistent and effective way across institutional boundaries... Issues like crime and social exclusion cannot be tackled on a departmental basis. ...We will build on the many strengths in the public sector to equip it with a culture of improvement, innovation and collaborative purpose. ...We want the civil service to reinforce its efforts to be more open and to recruit more experience, skills and ideas from outside. (Cm 4310, 1999)*

2009 Brown's Putting the frontline first: smarter government Time has come to change the way government delivers. Historic underinvestment has been corrected and once ambitious goals are increasingly seen as the norm thanks to a rigorous regime of targets and central direction... because of the success of this approach we can now embark on a radical dispersal of power where people will have enforceable guarantees over the services they receive, and frontline staff will have greater freedom over the services they give. ...[There are] three principles: open, accountable public services; devolved decision making; renewed focus on value for money. Taken collectively these principles demand a step change in how government is run for the turbulent times ahead – delivering better public services for lower costs... As citizens and communities are empowered and burdens reduced on the frontline central government can sharpen its focus on its core role: setting policy priorities, guaranteeing national standards and building up capacity within the public services. To achieve this government will continue its efforts to streamline the civil service and rationalise all back office functions. It will cut costs at the centre, bringing every part of Whitehall up to the standards of the best, and reduce the number of non-departmental ALBs. It will review where the civil service is located and take a more radical approach to selling state assets that are no longer needed. (CM 7753, 2009)

2012: Cameron and Maude's Civil Service Reform Plan: The sustained economic downturn ... rising consumer expectations and huge demographic change due to an aging and growing population are placing significant additional demands on public spending... [so] the Government is reforming public services... with radicalism and urgency... pushing power away from Whitehall and putting service users and communities in charge... the Civil Service will need to do less centrally and commission more from outside... The public increasingly expects to be able to access services quickly and conveniently, at times and in ways that suit them... it needs to become Digital by Default, in its skills, its style, how it communicates and how it enables service users to interact with it... too many projects fail. Leadership of change needs to be much stronger and more consistent; performance management is too rarely rigorous; and the culture

is too often slow and resistant to change... The Civil Service does not always have the right capabilities in the right place... the Civil Service needs staff with commissioning and contracting skills; and project management capabilities need a serious upgrade... the Civil Service needs to improve its policy skills... In future the leadership of the Civil Service will need to have greater operational experience and ability... for too long operational management and delivery has been undervalued compared with policy development... The old idea of a Civil Service “generalist” is dead – everyone needs the right combination of professionalism, expert skills and subject matter expertise.(HM Government, 2012)

Some of these reports are rooted in substantial analysis, evidence and engagement (Heath’s reorganisation of central government, Next Steps, Smarter Government and the 2012 Plan stand out in this respect). But there is often more political rhetoric and symbolism than analysis or evidence (Pollitt, 2013c). And the goals can be woolly and flexible. To understand reforms and their impact it is necessary to distinguish the rhetoric and symbolism of the reform narrative from the scope and intent of actions that follow. Even the most notable New Public Management (NPM) scholar has doubts on the stated intentionality of some landmark reforms as he concludes that NPM does not offer a model for significantly cutting costs. He wondered *‘whether NPM was mischaracterised as a set of public management policies designed to cut costs when in fact it may have been more about ideology and rhetoric?’* (Hood & Dixon, 2013).

These landmark reports reveal little about the genesis of reform ideas and actions. A hugely influential political science research project revealed that the way reform ideas reach the agenda is a long way from the traditional rational views of policy making and organisational change (Kingdon, 2014). Instead his Multiple Streams Approach identifies three streams (problems, policy, politics) which co-exist independently until the point where a policy window opens to create an opportunity for a few “policy entrepreneurs” (or agents) to push their conception of the problem and the solutions. The function which these agents serve in the system is one of connecting the three streams to the extent that they are sufficiently aligned to substantially increase the prospect of their ideas being adopted on an agenda for decision. The agent plays the role of broker and bricoleur as well as advocate (Kingdon, 2014).

The reality of institutional change is that intentions and goals will evolve as reforms are designed and implemented. This evolution is by no means a bad thing: compelling research in the field of institutional work has found this process of discourse and adjustment to be a critical factor that creates engagement and allows adaption to fit the reform to local contexts and priorities (Cloutier et al., 2016) - hence increasing its impact and sustainability.

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