

Scope and patterns

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. In this analysis I track the ambition and actions that followed these symbolic reform statements and provide a visualisation of the scope, intensity and duration of reform efforts since 1960.

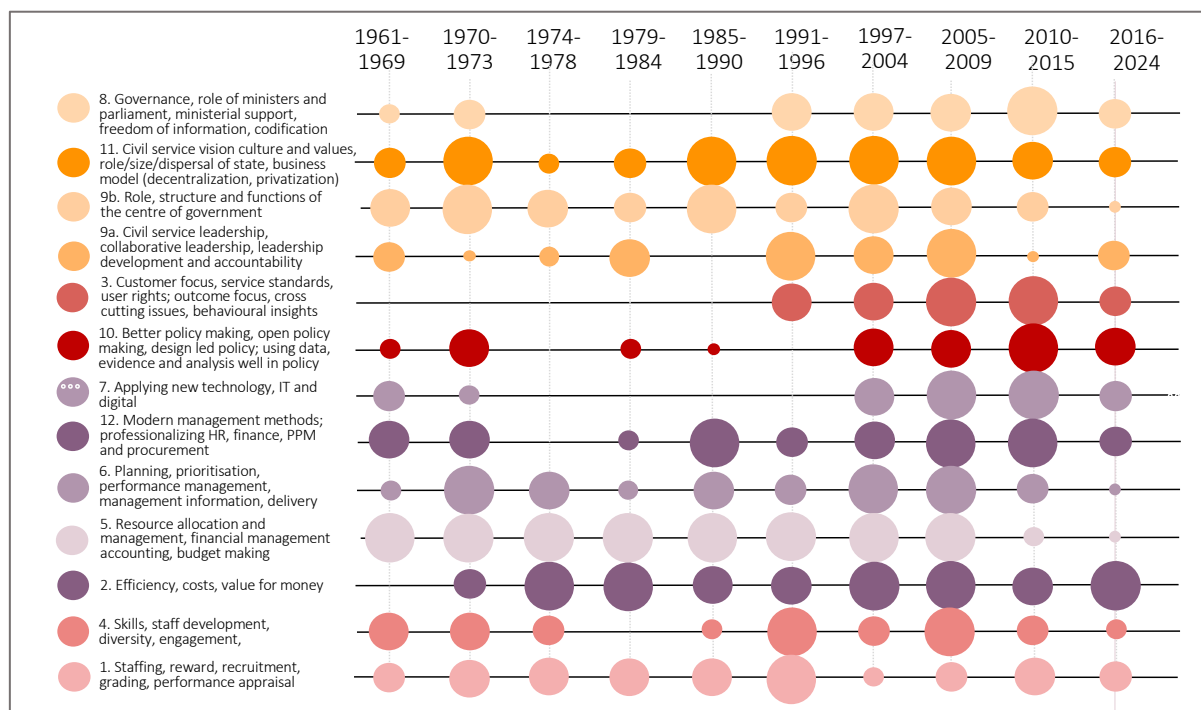
1. Understanding the scope of reforms: ambition and actions

The first stage of my analysis was to systematically review the phases and focus of reforms since 1961. I split the 65 years into 10 periods usually defined by changes of government – but not always. I drew on a range of sources, relying heavily on Rodney Lowe’s masterful Official History of the Civil Service Volumes 1 and 2, (Lowe, 2011); (Lowe et al., 2020) the bible of comparative public management reform (Pollitt, 2017), supplemented by selective review of the artefacts and research of specific reforms. I tabulated over 160 distinct reform elements running from the Plowden Committee on public expenditure in 1961 to the Johnson/Case declaration on civil service reform in 2021 - and sought to capture their new and continuing actions. This tabulation includes many less known reforms which have created the crucial foundations for their more famous offspring.

I assigned key words to each reform which I then used to generate labels for clusters of related reforms. As I coded, I revised and refined the cluster labels and then returned to revise the codes in an iterative process. These clusters naturally overlap in part and are often interdependent. I used a five-point rating scale for each reform to make a subjective assessment of ambition, meaningful action and follow through. I aggregated the coding for each reform period into a single set of ratings. Rating for one period often reflect the ongoing implementation of reforms that originated in a previous period, especially 1974-78 and 2016-24.

This analysis uncovers the extent to which actions continued over years or tailed off when senior interest moved on. For example, contrary to popular view, Major’s Government was more active and ambitious on more areas of reform than Thatcher. But Thatcher drove some foundational and transformative reforms very hard that only reached fruition during his government. The slow burn of these reforms emphasises the long-term nature of reform and need for continuity of support from successive prime ministers and senior officials.

Exhibit 2. The scope and intensity of reform efforts in the UK



Source: analysis by Peter Thomas. The size of the bubble represents the scale of ambition, action and implementation in line with that theme during the period.

There has been striking consistency in the scope of reform ambition and action. Nine of the 13 themes feature in almost all periods:

- the vision, culture, size, operating model and structures of the civil service;
- the role, structure and functions of the centre of government;
- civil service leadership, collaborative leadership, leadership development and accountability;
- planning, prioritisation, performance management, delivery;
- modern management methods, professionalising the civil service;
- the transparency of resource allocation, accounting methods and budget making;
- efficiency, costs and value for money;
- skills, staff development, diversity and engagement; and,
- staffing, reward, grading, recruitment.

The focus and language in each theme have evolved through the periods reflecting the trajectory of dominant ideas in contemporary management and organisational thinking, which have variously been promoted to government by business leaders and management consultancies.

Four reform themes have mainly come into the picture since the early 90's:

- Customer focus, service standards, outcome focus, behavioural insights.
- Better policy making, using data and analysis, design led policy, open policy making.
- Applying new technology, digital.
- Governance, role of ministers, codification, ministerial support, openness.

The focus on citizens and then cross-cutting outcomes from the 1990's onwards marks a distinctive shift along with the belated attention on policy making. The innately managerial focus of civil service reform is emphasised by how little attention was given to the quality of policy making over much of the period. This may reflect the more politically driven nature of policy making as well as a degree of complacency from officials about how well policy was made. The entrance of governance is likely a reaction to the groundswell of criticism that the civil service was being 'hollowed out' (Milward & Provan, 2003) by the impact of the reforms of the 80's and early 90's.

Reform is a long game. These patterns tell a story of iterative, evolutionary change. Next Steps is sometimes presented as a big bang reform but it was the culmination of thirteen years of previous reforms. The path dependency of most reforms is a striking feature: they depend on and build on previous reforms; and the ideas they draw on have been developing, circulating and evolving over time until they found that opportunity to coalesce. As Kate Jenkins - a key figure in the development and delivery of Next Steps - observed : *I do not say that Next Steps is a tremendous success because there are 103 agencies 10 or 15 years later. I say that it is a great success, as the FMI was a great success, because it has led on to the next thing, which is relevant to how the Civil Service is operating now. That is the real story of Civil Service reform (Kandiah, M., 2007).* In all nine of the continuous themes there are clear path dependencies running from the 1960s to the 2010's.

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References

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