

## Why we need a different conversation about impact

There is no shortage of views on the fitness for purpose of the civil service. The paradox of UK civil service reform is that is subject to two quite contradictory narratives.

The positive, sometimes evangelical, narratives come from international institutions, practitioners and some academics. The World Bank, International Monetary Fund and strategy consultancies continue to champion UK NPM reforms (Pollitt, 2013a). The academic industry that sprang up around the NPM Paradigm did much to promote the UK's reform experiments. There is a lucrative global industry promulgating often mangled, ahistorical and acontextual interpretations of major UK reforms.

On the other hand, assorted select committees, self-appointed commissions and think tank reports seem united in a negative narrative which portrays a civil service that despite endless reform is either unfit for purpose or a shadow of former glories. This negativity is fuelled by those academics with strong governance and 'Whitehall Model' interests rooted in the classic view of bureaucracy and public service. Such academics bemoan where the reforms of the 80's and 90's to have led to:

*...an institution whose organisational principles, culture and ethical standards are in disarray and decline... the end of the civil service'... 'the end of Whitehall' (Pyper & Burnham, 2011).*

*The civil service itself appears ever more marginalised in the policy process... increasingly, advice is sought from, and policy making is seen as a responsibility of people with interests to pursue. This marginalisation is also reflected in the apparent reliance on un-minuted meetings... between Ministers and their advisers - a reliance that undermines the accountability process (O'Toole, 2004)*

*...after two decades of 'new public management' the British state's administrative apparatus is now a fragile thing, vulnerable to acute failures and 'public service delivery disasters', and devoid of many of the 'strengths in depth' that once sustained it. (Dunleavy, 2018).*

The partial prescience of the 'decliner' perspective is shown by the following conclusion reached in 1995 addressing the question: The end of Whitehall? – a full 20 years before the governments of Johnson and Truss: *This subordination of the higher civil service carries dangers for politicians. Politicians may have destroyed state capacity that their successors will miss in two crucial respects:*

- 1. First, the conquest of Whitehall was achieved by politicians who had a most unusually clear idea of what they wished to achieve, and how they wished to achieve it. When British governments revert to the more typical situation in which they need the help of the civil service in developing policy ideas as well as in implementing them, will the civil service still be capable of providing them?*
- 2. Second, politicians also in the medium if not short term as well as the citizens they govern may miss the capacity of the bureaucracy to provide a check on their less well-considered plans. (Wilson & Barker, 1995)*

The executive summary (Urban et al., 2024) of the recent report from the IfG's Commission on the centre of government almost matches the famously scathing first chapter of the Fulton Report. But their fire is rightly directed primarily at issues of governance, the Cabinet, the Prime Minister's office and accountability - and much less at civil service management.

*The UK has become a highly centralised country with a closed, and weak, centre.*

*The centre of government fails to set and maintain an overall strategy for the government to follow. The resulting vacuum is filled by the powerful Treasury.*

*Cabinet... has ceased to be effective... the big decisions are taken elsewhere.*

*No.10 is underpowered but compulsively involved in detail, with ambiguous structures that undermine the clarity of instruction from the prime minister and encourage in-fighting. There is an inward-looking bunker mentality, too closed to the external expertise and outside perspectives that are necessary to make the best decisions.*

*The Cabinet Office... has become bloated and unfocused... it is failing in its core role of supporting the prime minister and cabinet... its relationships with other departments can be dysfunctional, reinforcing silos through a budget setting process that makes it harder to tackle the cross-cutting and long-term problems facing the country.*

*The civil service's leadership lacks authority – nobody is running the civil service from the centre. There is insufficient pressure or impetus to address urgent capability gaps in the skills, workforce planning and talent management of the civil service.*

However, there is a tendency amongst decliners to misplace the legitimate concerns about governance and accountability as the failings or consequences of civil service management reforms. The last 5 years have been a showcase of the limitations of UK governance, but there is a danger this diverts us into the wrong conversations about civil service management reform. To expect civil service reform to fix the fundamentals of the governance of government is another example of overloading expectations on essentially managerial reforms.

Has so little changed for the better after the frenzy of reform over the last 40 years?

Efforts by researchers to focus on particular bundles of reforms and test whether they met their intended outcomes provide a mixed picture on the impact of reforms.

NPM reforms in the UK are found to have failed in terms of the most consistently articulated NPM reform intention – efficiency (Hood & Dixon, 2013). For the classic period of NPM from 1980-1990 they found little evidence of real running cost reductions. The largest reduction within the entire period (1980-2008) was around 10% in the later years of the Major government. Unsurprisingly they concluded that NPM does not offer a model for cutting costs of the scale desired by the coalition in the first of several periods of austerity (2010-14).

The other ambitions of NPM beyond efficiency were performance improvement and responsiveness to service users (Pollitt & Dan, 2013). A large review of 519 studies of NPM impact across Europe (Pollitt & Dan, 2013) found a mixed 'hit or miss picture'. Whilst around half reported a positive impact, 47% of those looking at outputs found they did not improve, and 56% of those looking at outcomes reported no improvement. This European comparative review concluded that whilst NPM interventions could not be called a failure, the political, structural and cultural context was crucial to the success of NPM interventions. They compared

NPM interventions to *'a delicate plant [that] requires the right soil and care, more orchid than potato'*. As well as being intrinsically hard to evaluate, the importance of the context to each intervention complicates the attribution of the causes of any outputs and impacts (Pollitt & Dan, 2013).

So discerning the impact of managerial reforms is a tough task that faces several almost insurmountable barriers:

- The long term, incremental nature of major organisational change.
- Stated goals may not match the aims of a programme in practice, or they may be woolly at the outset only becoming clearer as design and implementation proceeds.
- 'Many reforms are, in effect, redesigned during implementation because new aspects or difficulties are discovered 'on the ground'. (Pollitt, 2013b).
- The context in which the reform is taking shape may change dramatically.
- The exceptional difficulty of attributing outcomes or effectiveness to specific techniques, processes or structures in any organisation let alone an institution like the Civil service (Pollitt, 2013a).

These barriers partly explain the lack of evaluation and the often-unsatisfactory findings of those few evaluations that are undertaken. In the face of this evaluation void the confidence of those taking a positive view of the benefits of managerial reform efforts has become almost ideological (Hood, 2009). Equally the wistful certainty of those who articulate a narrative of decline can appear as an ideological distaste for the notion of business and management in public administration (Chapman & O'Toole, 2010), (O'Toole, 2004). There is a persistent negative tone to much of the research on the development and impact of NPM which colours the story told of its impact (Funck & Karlsson, 2020).

Pyper and Burnham's (2011) adjudication on the competing perspectives of decline versus modernisation reflected that the stark divergence was substantially explained by the legitimate differences in focus between those concerned with governance and classical views of bureaucracy as opposed to those interested in the 'problems of management... getting things done' (Hood, 2009). Nonetheless they concluded:

*the 'decline' of the British civil service has been greatly exaggerated... the British civil service has shown a capacity for (sometimes delayed and partial) progressive modernisation during its long history, and the 'decline' theses seem to us to overstate the nature and scale of the difficulties that are said to have led this core institution of the British system of government into an apparently irreversible spiral of deterioration.*

None of this helps with the challenge of better understanding how and why reforms have positively changed the civil service in a way that is of practical use to those who would shape and run future reform efforts.

The starting point for my research is that both the public administration view and the prevailing narratives of decline are partial, often misleading and generally fail to capture the cumulative and transformational impact of 65 years of reforms.

It is possible to believe the civil service has substantially improved its capability through decades of reforms whilst also holding the view that it is still not fit enough for today's purpose and tomorrow's challenges.

The substantial barriers that Pollitt identified above point to the need for a different approach to trying to understand the impact of reforms and how they improve the effectiveness of government. Consequently, I am looking elsewhere for frameworks and theories that can help me understand the impact of civil service reforms (findings to be published in an article later in 2024).

I am exploring an alternative approach to the futility of seeking evidenced impact and causality. One such route is encapsulated by Joullie and Gould (2023) in the conclusions of their review of the limitations of management research:

*Rather than seek causality management researchers would better aim to 'understand and explain deliberate actions, situational choices, ambiguities and constraints' accepting that the actions of agents are not deterministically constrained. Such understanding needs to be rooted in the context of values, opportunities, and an imperfect pool of ideas and experience that are drawn on as choices are made and paths pursued.*

Some development administration researchers have addressed the limitations of the mindset and approach of impact evaluations carried out by major funders of globally public service reform interventions.

*there is a need for a positive orientation to reform success – not to supplant but to complement the predominantly negative orientation of World Bank and other evaluations of reform outcomes (McCourt, 2018).*

An increasing number of researchers have sought to address the theoretical limitations of the public administration tradition by drawing on theories from other fields. They have used theories from strategy process, strategy as practice, institutional work, sense-making and dynamic capability- often in combination - to understand change and its impact in public sector institutions. I have drawn on these to construct the first iteration of a conceptual framework to guide my research.

An article due later in 2024 will develop these approaches further to propose how better to look at reform impact, and how that improved approach would change our view of notable reforms.

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