

The breadth and intensity of reform

As my piece on reform scope showed 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:

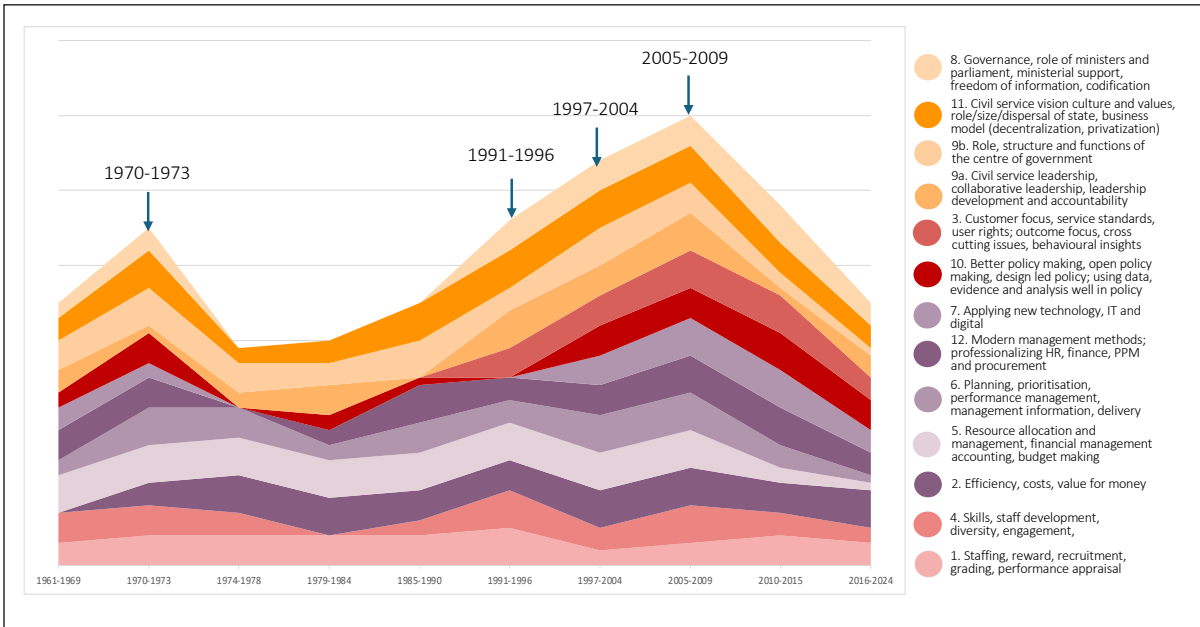
- Customer focus, service standards, outcome focus, behavioural insights.
- Better policy making, using data and analysis, design led policy, open policy making.
- Applying new technology, digital.
- Governance, role of ministers, codification, ministerial support, openness.

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.

Exhibit 1. The breadth and intensity of civil service reform action 1960-2024



Source: analysis by Peter Thomas.

The breadth of reform efforts narrows during periods of economic and political crisis, notably 1974-79, and 2016-2024. Such reform as there was during those periods tended to be a continuation of reforms initiated before that period, alongside an increased attention to the enduring issues of expenditure control and cost reductions.

The breadth and intensity of reform efforts during the Major, Blair and Brown governments is striking. This may reflect the relative lack of economic and political crises but more likely the continuity and agglomeration of reforms as they became embedded in the civil service and the agenda of senior civil servants. There is also remarkable continuity between Thatcher Major, Blair and Brown in terms of the main reform themes if not always the rhetoric surrounding them. This continuity emphasises that civil service reform is a largely managerial agenda not a policy agenda.

This continuity also reflects the emergence of a tangible senior civil service leadership collective with a shared sense of purpose between 1995 and 2010. This was reinforced by successive Cabinet Secretaries and reached its zenith in Cabinet Secretary O'Donnell's creation of the top 200 senior management group, a revamped Civil Service Management Board and his explicit expectation that senior civil servants would contribute to collective leadership of the civil service (a more contentious proposition for some than you might expect):

I have a phrase called "100:0:0". If you spend 100% of your time just on your day job that is wrong. The next zero is how much do you spend working for your department? The next part is how much do you spend working for the Civil Service as a whole? I am trying to move people to the right on that spectrum. (PAC, 2009)

An evolving group of senior officials (often later becoming permanent secretaries) were consistent players in the main strands of reform through the 90's and noughties. As that

generation left the civil service the collective leadership of the civil service lost their shared sense of purpose, agency and commitment. This seems likely to be one factor in the dwindling carry through of managerial reforms beyond O'Donnell's tenure. As a report I co-authored at the Institute for Government in 2014 observed:

it is not clear that the Civil Service Board or wider group of permanent secretaries see improving the health of the Civil Service as a core part of their role. There is not a shared view of the level of action required to reform the Civil Service. This sends out mixed messages and weakens the case for corporate leadership even among those most willing to lead beyond their own department (Thomas et al., 2014).

This loss of momentum was undoubtedly exacerbated by increasing hostility to senior civil servants from 2016 onwards, exemplified by Dominic Cummings gratuitous 'hard rain' and the sacking of several permanent secretaries. The all-consuming crises of Brexit and the Covid 19 pandemic, the tragic death of the Cabinet Secretary Jeremy Heywood, and the chaos that characterised the 'shopping trolley' premierships of Johnson and Truss' self-inflicted implosion have left senior civil service confidence and collective leadership at a low ebb in 2024.

Peter Thomas 8-4-2024

References

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