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The patterns of civil service reform in the UK

1. Introduction

This article marks the launch my new website *civilservicereformuk.com*. This website is a hub for my research investigating when, why and how civil service reform works. I aim to develop actionable insights that will help both politicians and officials to succeed in civil service reform.

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. In the absence of compelling evidence on the impact of reforms the confidence of those taking a positive view of the benefits of managerial reform efforts has become almost ideological (Hood, 2009). The wistful certainty of those who articulate a narrative of decline seems to reflect an similarly ideological distaste for the notion of business and management in public administration (Chapman & O'Toole, 2010), (O'Toole, 2004).

Discerning the impact of managerial reforms is a tough task that faces almost insurmountable barriers. These barriers partly explain the lack of evaluation and the often-unsatisfactory findings of those few evaluations that are undertaken.

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 main body of public administration research has struggled to articulate what successful reform looks like; largely failed to offer actionable insights into how successful reform is achieved; neglected the role of politics and policy choices; and, for some of the biggest challenges facing government (for example financial crises) exaggerated the potential of management to resolve them (Pollitt 2017; Peters 2017).

None of this helps with the challenge of better understanding how and why reforms have positively changed the civil service.

This article revisits the flow of reforms and distinguishes between the ideas, impetus and rhetoric that cloud the origins and actuality of reforms. It will make the case for thinking differently about reforms and their impact.

2. 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
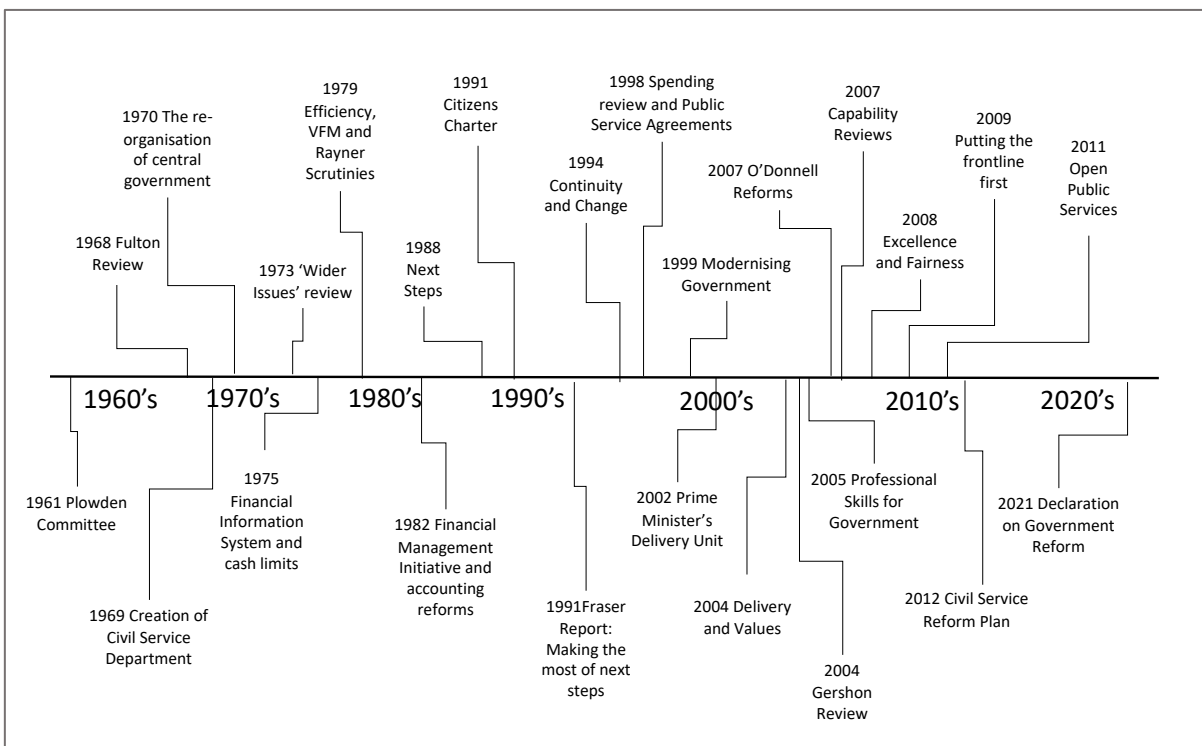
Source: Analysis by Peter Thomas

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.

3. 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 arid 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 form 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 standout 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.

My analysis for this article has tracked the ambition and actions that followed these symbolic reform statements and provides a visualisation of the scope, intensity and duration of reform efforts since 1960.

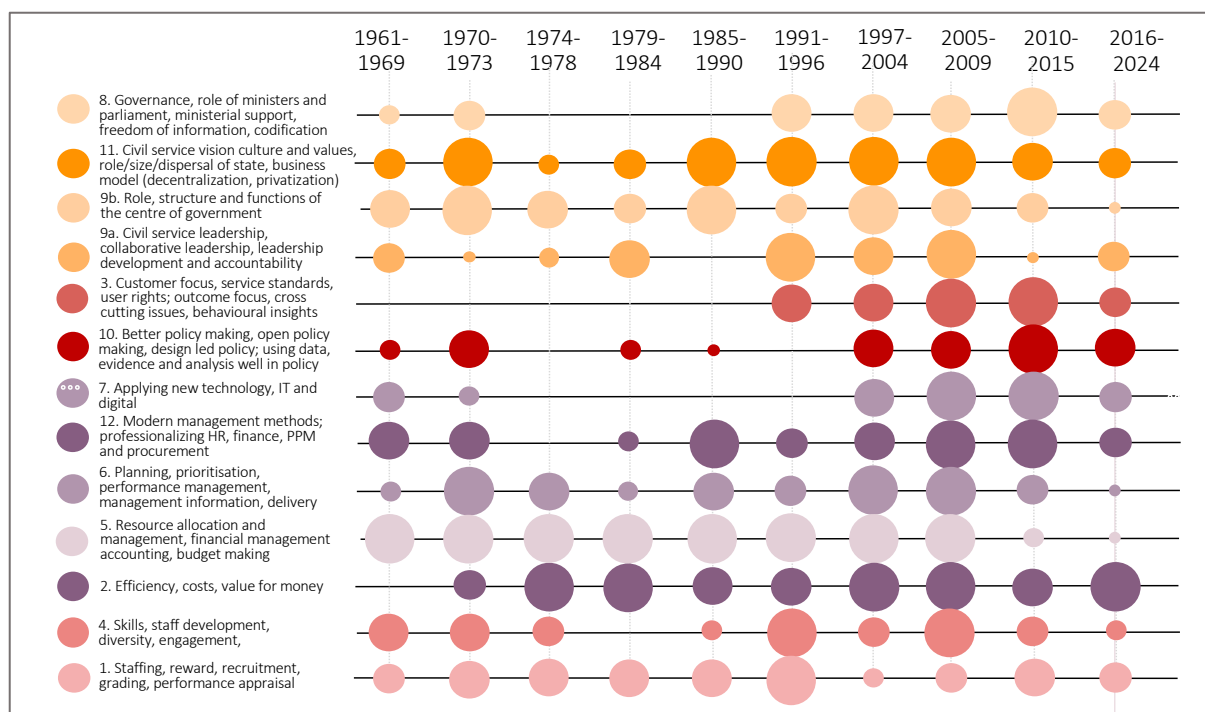## 4. Understanding the scope of reforms: ambition and actions

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.

Exhibit 3. The breadth and intensity of civil service reform action 1960-2024
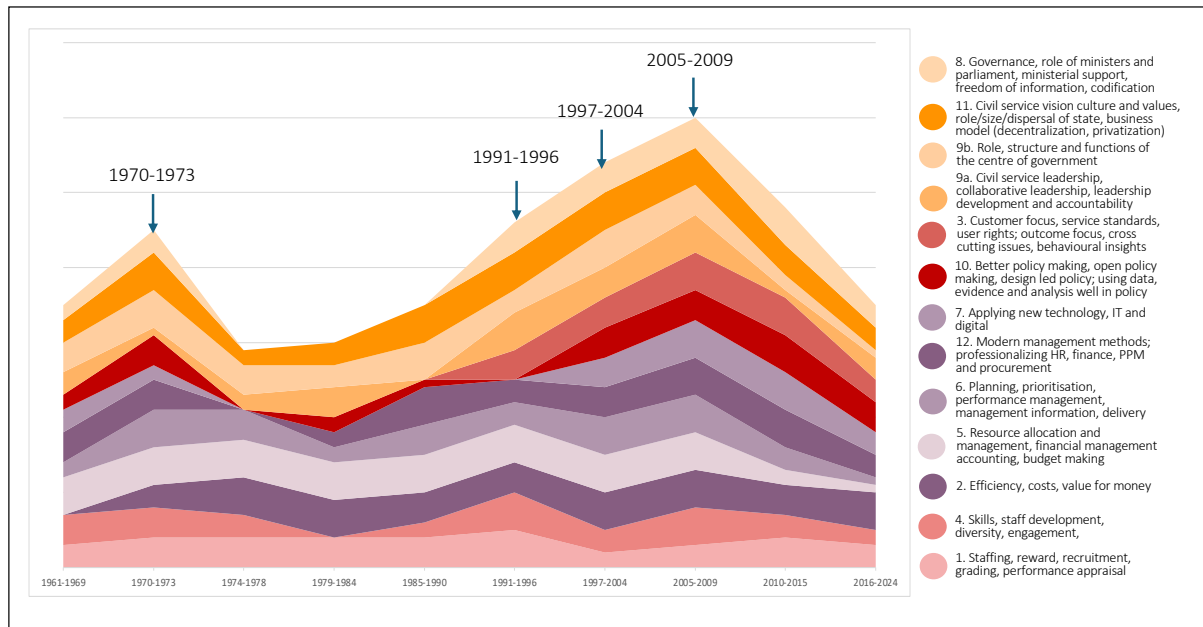
Source: analysis by Peter Thomas.

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' premiership of Johnson and Truss' self-inflicted implosion have left senior civil service confidence and collective leadership at a low ebb in 2024.

5. A parade of paradigms

The scholarly view of the purpose and functions of the civil service management and what that means for its managers has evolved substantially over the last 40 years. For over a century Public Administration notions dominated: a centralised bureaucracy which makes and implements policy in a hierarchical way, the rule of law, administering rules and guidelines and maintaining a clear political-administrative split within government (Osborne, 2006).

In the early 90's the New Public Management paradigm (NPM) (Hood, 1991) characterised the interventions to improve civil service management that developed in the late 70's and 80's. Rooted in public choice theory and classical economics, NPM was defined in terms of reforms aimed at improving efficiency, effectiveness within an over-riding belief in market mechanisms as the primary driver of efficiency and effectiveness in all sectors.

Later articles from the father of the NPM paradigm (Hood & Dixon, 2013) describe three phases of NPM stretching in roughly 10 year blocks from 1980 to 2008: early NPM from 1980-81 to 1990-91 sometimes characterised as a hard neo-taylorist approach of short term cost limitation pursed in a single-minded way; middle NPM from 1990-91 to 2000-01 when the emphasis switched to a softer quality agenda alongside that of cost control; and finally late or post NPM 2000-01 to 2008-09. These periods are thinly drawn and over-extend the NPM paradigm. His original article was the catalyst for a rich debate about public management but my tabulation of reform efforts over the last 65 years reveals plenty of elements whose intention and action are either poorly captured by competing versions of the NPM paradigm or were in play well before the NPM epoch.

Dunleavy (2005) declared NPM dead and crowned 'digital era governance' as the new king of public management thinking. But this coronation seems less meaningful than work already underway in the Blair government's Strategy Unit (Kelly, 2002) inspired by earlier work on public value (Moore, 2001) which represented part of the emergence of 'whole of government' reforms (Christensen & Lægreid, 2016). This was best articulated in the twin paradigms of

networked governance (Osborne, 2006) and public value management (PVM) (Stoker, 2006). Some scholars count this period as 'late NPM', but by drawing on industrial sociology and network theory PVM in fact represented a substantial change in beliefs and assumptions about the role of civil service management and the job of its managers. In the PVM framework the role of the state is to 'steer society' through dialogue and exchange with a wider range of participants in a complex and uncertain world. Rules and incentives are insufficient- new ways to collaborate and legitimise decision making are needed. The implications for political and managerial leaders are profound: success depends on the building of successful relationships through networks and partnerships... *'efficiency is not achieved by handing over the job to bureaucrats or managers... the key is learning exchange and mutual search for solutions.'... 'no one is in charge but leaders at various levels play a role. It is not a linear relationship between a principal and agent.'* (Stoker, 2006) Unlike NPM, the academic work of Moore, Osborne and Stoker substantially influenced thinking at the heart of Government throughout the noughties and can plainly be seen in the Cabinet Office's pamphlet on public service reform 'Excellence and fairness' (Kelly, 2002) and Brown's Smarter Government (CM 7753, 2009).

Echoing Osborne, other more pragmatic public administration scholars (Pollitt, 2017) (Christensen & Lægreid, 2016) (Funck & Karlsson, 2020) have argued that Public Administration, NPM and 'post-NPM' reforms interacted and evolved in a dynamic way rather than one replacing the other. Older components of public administration remain, fused with a gradual growth of managerialism within public management which evolved into an 'early NPM' period in the 1980's which drew most on harder market mechanisms and then to 'late NPM' from the mid 90's onwards which focused more on softer interventions around people, customers, and quality. Osborne (2006) argued that NPM should be seen as a transitional period between the centralised, bureaucratic tradition of public administration and the emerging pluralist framework of the noughties.

Pollitt visualises these successive waves as layers of sediment which intermingle in irregular ways. He argues that, far from being dead, many components of NPM have been repurposed or are deeply embedded in civil service management in the UK (Pollitt, 2016): *this view of the past 40 years as basically a 'parade of the paradigms', though not entirely fictitious, and certainly handy for textbooks and classrooms, is flawed. In fact each alleged era contains many examples of counter-trends, and at the same time some loudly trumpeted innovations are actually ideas which have been around before, though usually under different labels."* (Pollitt, 2013, p. 468)

Scholars of comparative public management reforms have exposed the importance of context and path dependency to the trajectory and impact of reforms. Some have concluded that reforms can also change the context: *'reforms are at one and the same time both a product of cultural, structural and environmental features and a cause of change in those features.'* (Christensen & Lægreid, 2016).

Public administration research has tended to focus on the what and when of reforms (Pollitt, 2017) – in doing so it overlaps with contemporary history examining civil service reform. Together they do the important job of characterizing reform episodes as well as the emergent nature of strategic change in the civil service over the last 40 years. They provide a good picture

of the 'what' and 'when' of reform which provides an essential foundation for those who would look deeper at why and how (Pollitt & Dan 2013; (Pollitt, 2017).

The alternative research sub-field of development administration has stepped aside from the parade of paradigms and taken a more practice-oriented approach. Some see the substantially more numerous reform evaluations by major donors in this field as *offering more detailed and nuanced analysis than any UK white papers… more willing critically to examine past efforts, and… generally more acknowledging that there is considerable room for debate (Pollitt, 2013b)*. McCourt (2018) proposes a simple problem oriented view of alternative approaches to international public service reforms. Addressing the first problem is an essential precursor to tackling the others.

Table 1. Six public service reform approaches

Problem	Approach	Main action period
1. How can we put government on an orderly and efficient footing?	'Weberian' public administration and capacity-building	Post-independence period in south Asia and sub-Saharan Africa
2. How can we get government closer to the grassroots?	Decentralization	1970s to present
3. How can we make government more affordable?	Pay and employment reform	1980s and 1990s
4. How can we make government perform better and deliver on our key objectives?	New Public Management	1990s to present
5. How can we make government more honest?	Integrity and anti-corruption reforms	1990s to present
6. How can we make government more responsive to citizens?	'Bottom-up' reforms	Late 1990s to present

Source: McCourt (2018).

The development administration research sub-field diverges from the mainstream public administration trajectory by focusing strongly on practice, politics, context and local ownership of reforms. Their distinctive approach to the challenge of evaluation of impact goes beyond the limits of much of public administration research and provides a helpful input to answering the question – how do we better evaluate the impact of civil service reforms in the UK?

Meanwhile the main body of Public Administration research has struggled to articulate what successful reform looks like; largely failed to offer actionable insights into how successful reform is achieved; neglected the role of politics and policy choices; and, for some of the biggest challenges facing government (for example financial crises) exaggerated the potential of management to resolve them (Pollitt 2017; Peters 2017).

A review of 30 years of Public Administration research concluded: 'neither of the two dominant strands of research is conducive to an understanding of real-world public administration in a conceptual and empirical perspective… Both fail in fostering public administration research that advances public administration as an academic discipline… it has failed to engage stakeholders, bureaucrats and managers (Peters 2017).

6. We need a different conversation about the impact of civil service reforms

There is no shortage of views on the fitness for purpose of the civil service. The paradox of UK civil service reform is that it 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 particular 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, 2013c).
- 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).

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 (see for example: (Burgelman et al., 2018), (Cloutier et al., 2016), (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), (Kattel & Mazzucato, 2018), (Loureiro et al., 2021), (Lozeau et al., 2002), (Pablo et al., 2007), (Pettigrew et al., 1992), (Poister et al., 2010), (Piening, 2013)). Within these research fields there are calls for greater efforts to bridge, connect and even combine theories – so as to benefit from their respective strengths and mitigate some of their limitations when applied in isolation (see for example: (Vaara & Whittington, 2012), (Suddaby et al., 2013), (Burgelman et al., 2018), (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022), (Kohtamäki et al., 2022)).

An article elsewhere on my website identifies and explores the most promising areas of research for illuminating how reforms succeed. I have drawn on these to construct the first iteration of a framework to guide my research.

In particular I am researching whether concept of dynamical capabilities- specifically knowledge based capabilities- may provide a tangible way to identify the impact of civil service reforms. I intend to rely on research which is establishing an increasingly plausible case for the impact of these intermediate outcomes on the institutional and organisational effectiveness and longevity to provide a foundation for my approach. My ambition then is to make the case for a plausible relationship between outcomes, and then focus my primary research efforts on understanding the design and practice of reforms which caused these outcomes described in terms of particular dynamic capabilities. It could be possible to gauge this intermediate reform outcome and connect it directly to the scope and practice of a series of reforms.

Another perspective that seem well founded 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.*

I will be exploring all these themes further in an article due later in 2024.

My further primary and secondary research will re-tell the story of past reforms in a way that provides a fresh perspective on why and how they succeeded. By focusing on the practice of key reformers I will be able to draw out actionable insights for those who would shape and run future reform efforts.

7. Conclusions

Civil service management reform is a long game. It can take 10 or even 20 years for reforms to come to fruition.

Individual reforms evolve and agglomerate. They intermingle and adapt. They provide the foundations for subsequent reforms. The path dependency of reforms is striking.

Context is critical to the genesis of reforms as well as their subsequent development and implementation.

There is an oddly cultish dimension to the inflated expectations of what can be achieved by managerial reforms, unsupported by evidence of their impact.

Civil service management seems too often to be the fall guy for the failure of governments to bring political ambition, courage and persistence to bear on major economic and policy challenges - or for the recent absence of integrity and honesty.

A persistently negative narrative about the civil service is in part fuelled by the misconception that managerial reforms can fix deep rooted problems in the governance of government - they cannot.

We have learned little about the impact of reforms, and are unable to articulate their impact let alone how they achieved that impact.

The evaluation of impact is extremely difficult using conventional approaches (intention versus outcome). We need a different conversation about better ways to capture the impact of reforms.

Thinking differently about reform impact will in turn enable us to better investigate how successful reforms were achieved.

We will need to look beyond public administration research to do that. There are promising avenues that some researchers are starting to explore.

After 65 years of reforms, public administration research and endless reports, reviews and commissions on civil service management we are left in the surprising position summarised by Pollitt: *"we have learned remarkably little from the almost ceaseless procession of reforms… Below the surface, however, the reform process itself has changed far less, and the absence of firm knowledge concerning outcomes has remained stubbornly constant"* (Pollitt, 2013, p. 465)

My research programme aims to develop actionable insights that will help both politicians and officials to succeed in civil service reform. It may take some time.

Peter Thomas 8-4-2024

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