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THE END OF WHITEHALL?

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The End of Whitehall?

Patrick Diamond

In my recent book *The End of Whitehall? Government by Permanent Campaign* (Palgrave, 2018), two key arguments are made about changes in the bureaucratic machinery in Britain. The first supports the claim that Whitehall has drastically changed over the last thirty years. The Whitehall 'paradigm' is unrecognisable compared to fifty or one hundred years ago. The system of public administration is shaped by the ethos of the 'permanent campaign' and the New Political Governance (NPG). In the British administrative tradition, civil servants were loyal to the government of the day, not the political party that comprised the government. That convention has been turned on its head. Now, officials are beholden to the governing party's agenda and its partisan motives.

The second point relates to the consequences of undermining the Whitehall paradigm, which has been detrimental to the quality of statecraft. The institutions of the British state operate according to the imperatives of the 'permanent campaign' and NPG. The motivation of advisers and appointees in Whitehall is political, focused on personal loyalty to the Minister. Ministerial interference in the appointment of civil servants undermines Northcote-Trevelyan. Officials are required to implement policies they played little or no role in formulating. Those who raise their heads above the parapet risk being ostracised. The UK's government machinery is more vulnerable to 'group think' and 'promiscuous partisanship'. The Whitehall model is dissipating.

THE DEMISE OF THE WHITEHALL MODEL

All recent governments have been complicit in the denigration of the Whitehall model. There have been major changes in the state bureaucracy, the consequence of a long-term transformation in the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats. Institutions have been recast in the name of new approaches to public management. Civil servants are no

longer expected to highlight difficulties or point out that there are alternative ways of addressing problems. The commitment of civil servants and Ministers to a shared view of the state as advancing the public good has withered. The shrinking of UK government after a decade of austerity has been a further driver of change. The dramatic reduction in civil service numbers and the size of Whitehall departments has been significant.

The undermining of the Whitehall model has been detrimental to good government. A recent report on the Treasury's role in the financial crisis by the Second Permanent Secretary, Sharon White, underlined the risks posed by cuts and restructuring. The 'fiasco' over the West Coast mainline railway, where the franchise tendering process was cancelled following a successful legal challenge by the train operating companies, has exposed major problems in the governance of contracts.

In Britain, civil servants are now expected to do precisely what the Prime Minister and secretaries of state demand. Political advisers and aides saturate Whitehall where partisan imperatives now prevail. When Ministers take exception to advice, they establish 'independent' commissions of experts who feed in *ad hoc* opinions. On issues likely to affect the governing party's electoral prospects, the centre enforces 'message control'. Civil servants depend on a favourable reputation among politicians to gain promotion. They are expected to enthusiastically support initiatives and carry out the orders of their political masters with conviction. The public service ethic encapsulated in the doctrines of Northcote-Trevelyan (1) and Haldane (2) has been worn away. Weber's distinction between 'administration' and 'politics' no longer holds true in British governance. The UK state bureaucracy has gone beyond a 'tipping-point'.

WHY HAS THE WHITEHALL MODEL BEEN REPLACED?

Why has the Whitehall model been replaced? One factor weakening the paradigm relates to ministerial dissatisfaction. The Whitehall model has been eroded because Ministers are less enamoured of the support they receive. Officials are perceived as obstructive or risk-averse. Their commissioning skills are roundly criticised. Civil servants are regarded as poor at managing major projects. Public trust in officials is declining. As a consequence, politicians

are less committed to the public service bargain. The professionalization of politics foreseen by Max Weber leads Ministers to require capabilities not provided by the traditional Whitehall machinery.

Another reason why NPG replaced the Whitehall model is the capacities of central government have been depleted. Meanwhile, there is growing demand for innovation to deliver 'more for less'. The situation compels Ministers to look outside the bureaucracy for insight and implementation capacity. As a consequence, 'cosy triangles' of elite decision-making are replaced by 'big sloppy hexagons' of actors from across the public, private, and civil society sectors. Increasingly, management consultants and think-tanks fill the void.

THE EROSION OF TRUST

Over the last twenty years, however, the state bureaucracy has been contaminated by the rise of the 'spin' machine and the imperatives of the 'permanent campaign'. Democratic institutions have been hollowed-out. The rational Weberian model is under attack from the 'entrepreneurs of the state' – think-tanks, management consultants, unelected advisers – who stalk Whitehall at Ministers' behest. There are sources of division and structural divergence arising from the growth of nationalist sentiment in Wales, Scotland and England, as well as the disputes surrounding Britain's decision to leave the EU in June 2016.

Moreover, there has been a dramatic erosion of trust in the civil service, underlined by the unseemly, tactless interventions in the 2014 and 2016 referendums. Officials must never be supplicants, blindly following the edicts of their political masters. Civil servants have a vital role to play in safeguarding the institutions of British democracy and the integrity of public policy, upholding the separation of powers that are essential for a well-governed state.

Britain's decision to leave the EU has seismic implications for the machinery of government. Further change in Whitehall resulting from diplomatic and regulatory divergence from Europe is inevitable. The view that Whitehall has been fundamentally altered is likely to be strengthened in the coming decades. It may be that cuts in the size of the bureaucracy are reversed after Brexit. What cannot easily be undone is the loss of policy-making capability

and institutional memory in Whitehall, raising fundamental questions about the British state's capacity to steer a sensible course through the perilous post-Brexit landscape.

NOTES

- 1) https://www.academia.edu/27518563/Northcote_Trevelyan_Report
- 2) https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/1918_Haldane_Report.pdf

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