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ROBERT PYPER

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For Emma and Michael

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PREFACE

The purpose of this book is to provide an introduction to the British civil service, combining factual description with comment and analysis. It should be emphasised at the outset that our concern is specifically with the *British* civil service, since, technically, the government of the United Kingdom is not served by a single, UK-wide administrative machine. The separate Northern Ireland Civil Service shares many common features and characteristics with the British model, but it is a distinct organisation, and does not form part of our primary interest.

The civil service is something of an enigma. For decades, its image was that of a rule-bound ‘bureaucracy’, staffed by distant, aloof mandarins at the top levels, and grey officials in the local outposts. The task of this predominantly London-based organisation was, apparently, to provide government ministers with impartial advice, steer clear of any whiff of political controversy and deliver services to the public while showing the maximum respect for regulations and jargon, and a minimal concern for the real requirements of the clients. Students of politics who took a serious interest in the workings of the civil service were likely to be deemed marginally masochistic, and perhaps a little like the subject of their interest: dull and a bit, well, boring.

This image of the civil service was a crude and misleading caricature. It stuck, none the less, and elements of it remain, even today. However, popular and academic perceptions seem to have changed to

some extent over recent years. Perhaps this has stemmed from the political controversy surrounding the Ponting and Westland affairs, when the roles and responsibilities of civil servants became the subject of heated debate. Maybe the fact that a politically neutral organisation, designed to serve different parties as they alternate in government, has been required to serve a single party for so long, focused attention on the operation of the service. Alternatively, it might be argued that the Thatcher Government's much-trumpeted attempt to reform the civil service naturally created an interest in the results.

Whatever the explanation, it cannot be denied that the civil service today forms not a dreary backwater, but one of the main-streams of political study. No longer confronted with a limited number of dated and dusty tomes, the interested student can now choose from an ever-expanding selection of general surveys and specialist monographs and articles. Newspaper, television and radio coverage of civil service affairs is surely greater than it has ever been, and the student seeking up-to-date illustrative examples should never be at a loss. As if the burgeoning academic and journalistic interest is not enough, the 'dull and boring' civil service has been the subject of an extremely popular and award-winning television *comedy* series (*Yes, Minister*).

This book offers an insight into one of most vital organs within the body politic, as it faces the challenges of the late 1990s. One of the major themes which runs through the text concerns the nature and impact of the structural and managerial changes introduced over recent years. Could these have the effect of dismantling the traditional, unitary civil service, leaving us with a looser, federal structure, characterised by organisational and managerial diversity? Can such a process take place without destroying fundamental elements of traditional civil service?

The introductory chapter will set the scene for the detailed examination which follows, by establishing some general benchmarks. The historical development of the institution, the key precepts which govern its operation and the basic conditions of service for officials will be described, before a few comparisons are drawn with the civil services of other liberal democratic states.

Chapter 2 explains how civil servants are recruited and trained, and examines the changes which have been introduced to the traditional, highly centralised systems. Here, we can note some symptoms of federalisation.

In Chapter 3, we turn to the overall size, shape and organisational culture of the service. The 'new' managerialism and radical restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s are placed in context. An attempt is made to distinguish between 'macro' and 'micro' change, and the emergence of a federal civil service is discussed.

Chapter 4 focuses on the high politics of the civil service, and considers the relationships between ministers and officials. The roles and responsibilities of civil servants in the sphere of policy are examined in practical and theoretical contexts.

The link between helping to create policy and playing a part in its implementation is central to the functioning of a civil service. The delivery, administration or implementation of policy forms the basic concern of Chapter 5. Here, we look at the growing concern with quality of service provision, and the controversial part played by the Citizen's Charter in highlighting the 'quality' agenda.

The efficacy of the various channels through which civil servants are held accountable for their roles in policy, administration and management comes under scrutiny in Chapter 6. Consideration is given to the extent to which the structural reforms introduced under the umbrella of Next Steps have enhanced or weakened the accountability of the civil service to Parliament.

In Chapter 7, the associated theme of official secrecy is discussed. The British tradition of relatively 'closed' government is examined, before we analyse the implications of this for civil servants. Key case studies are considered, and minor changes to the secrecy regime explained, in the context of the apparently limited willingness and capacity of government to offer fundamental reform in this sphere.

Chapter 8 draws our attention to the growing importance of the European Union for the British civil service. The rocky path to UK membership of the EC is charted in order to establish the broad context within which British officials came to work with the European institutions. We describe the impact of membership of the European Union on civil servants in a range of central, co-ordinating bodies, as well as the departments and agencies.

The concluding chapter reiterates our basic theme: the emergence of a new form of civil service in the wake of the structural and managerial changes of the past two decades.

I owe debts of gratitude to a number of individuals who, in different ways, have contributed a great deal to the production of

this book. John Benyon, the series editor, invited me to write on this topic. Clare Grist, of Harvester Wheatsheaf, was all that one could want from a publisher: unfailingly patient, encouraging and constructive. Although I carry full responsibility for any flaws in the text, I am grateful to the anonymous reader who commented on the first draft of the manuscript, and to Dr Allan McConnell who took time during a busy schedule to read and comment on a version of Chapter 8. Thanks are due to my colleagues in the Department of Law and Public Administration at Glasgow Caledonian University, who contribute to an atmosphere which is conducive to research and writing. On the domestic front, my wife, Elinor, succeeds against all the odds in creating a quiet zone around the door of my study. Despite, the rather derogatory connotation of the last comment, I dedicate the book to my children!

ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Administrative Assistant
AO	Administrative Officer
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
COREPER	Committee of Permanent Representatives
CPRS	Central Policy Review Staff
CPSA	Civil and Public Services Association
CSA	Child Support Agency
CSD	Civil Service Department
CSPCS	Civil Service Pay and Conditions of Service (Code)
CSSB	Civil Service Selection Board
DHSS	Department of Health and Social Security
DoE	Department of the Environment
DSS	Department of Social Security
DTI	Department of Trade and Industry
EC	European Community
ECSC	European Coal and Steel Community
ED	Employment Department
EEC	European Economic Community
ENA	Ecole Nationale d'Administration
EO	Executive Officer
ERM	Exchange Rate Mechanism
EU	European Union
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
FDA	First Division Association

FMI	Financial Management Initiative
FSB	Final Selection Board
GCHQ	Government Communications Headquarters
HEO	Higher Executive Officer
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
IPCS	Institute of Professional Civil Servants
IT	Information Technology
MAFF	Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
MINIS	Management Information System for Ministers
MoD	Ministry of Defence
MPO	Management and Personnel Office
MSC	Manpower Services Commission
NAO	National Audit Office
NUCPS	National Union of Civil and Public Servants
OPSS	Office of Public Service and Science
PAC	Public Accounts Committee
PCA	Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration
PQ	Parliamentary Question
RAS	Recruitment and Assessment Services (Agency)
RIPA	Royal Institute of Public Administration
SCA	Special Committee on Agriculture
SEO	Senior Executive Officer
SSRB	Senior Salaries Review Body
TSRB	Top Salaries Review Body
UKREP	United Kingdom Permanent Representative
VFM	Value for Money