

CHAPTER 19

THE FUTURE OF THE CIVIL SERVICE

WE have now reached a point when it will be as well to draw the threads of our argument together and to see, if we can, the direction in which it leads us. We began with definition and found that no formula attempting to describe the Civil Service could be regarded as adequate which omitted also to define the state of which it was said to be the administrative machinery. We were principally concerned therefore to discover whether this state was one which, in the period covered by this survey, could be said to represent the interests of the whole of the people, or whether its operations were in substance confined to furthering and protecting the interests of a controlling minority. Can we arrive at a sound conclusion based on the facts presented in the foregoing chapters?

We have examined the general structure of the Civil Service and found that it mirrors most of the features which distinguish the social system within which it operates. In its class divisions and more or less watertight gradings, it maintains the class traditions of society as a whole. Its remuneration is, as we have seen, influenced by the long-term trend in industry and there has been an open and oft repeated disclaimer on the part of the Treasury of any responsibility to behave like a model employer. Where pension is concerned it has accepted no contractual obligation, and its general conditions of employment, particularly with regard to accommodation and equipment, confirm the view that monopoly capitalism is not prepared to pay more than it is obliged in order to obtain the service which it requires the state apparatus to render. We have observed that its administrative officials are for the most part drawn from one class, which explains a natural, almost a subconscious, bias towards the existing order and an instinctive aversion towards socially desirable innovation. Where this is not so (and there are a growing number of exceptions) it has

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been found impossible to transcend the limitations imposed by "the system". We have seen too that the scientific and technical staffs have been almost as much at the disposal of capitalist production as if they had been directly employed in industry and that their divorcement from departmental administration has deprived them of the opportunity of influencing the direction of its policy. It has become clear that Service trade unionism is itself forced to adapt its technique to the conditions created by a multi-tiered and overdepartmentalized structure and that within the sphere of Whitleyism its progress has been slow and its successes partial. The attitude of the Treasury towards women in the Service has demonstrated clearly its intention to accept the still prevalent view of sex-differentiation as expressed by the large body of outside employers and its reluctance to take the lead in educating public opinion on such questions for instance as the continued employment of women on marriage.

Finally we have discovered, in a brief review of the development of selected government departments, the close relationship of their function with the changing needs of private enterprise and the frustration arising for the civil servant as a direct result of that relationship.

It would seem then that in our examination we have arrived at the view that Civil Service practice fits in with a theory of the state, which sees it as the representative of a class in whose hands the control over the instruments of production rests and not as the representative of the total community. Nor shall we consider this assumption to be invalidated by the obvious fact that a large part of the state apparatus is given over to the administration of a measure of social service, because we shall regard this as the minimum premium paid by capitalism as an insurance against social unrest.

Naturally therefore when we come to put forward our proposals for the post-war reconstruction of the Civil Service, it will be with this view of the state in our minds. We shall not be so utopian as to expect to alter radically the shape and function of the Service in advance of the alteration in the shape and function of the economic system. At the same time

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we shall not suppose that there is nothing that we can do to influence the process of development both inside the Civil Service and in the larger movement of which it is a part. The major responsibility of progressively minded civil servants to-day is to work and plan for the sort of public service which, in structure and outlook, is capable of shouldering the new tasks which a planned economy will thrust upon it. The reasons which they can bring forward to explain the inability of the Service to solve problems inherent in a private profit system will help to convince the mass of the people that they and they alone can find the solution. Beveridge for instance declared in a recent speech dealing with his own report that "the unplanned capitalist system of society as we had it between the two wars did not give reasonable security from idleness, and without great changes it could not do so". "We must", he said, "recognize these facts and be prepared for great changes. It must become the formal responsibility of the state so to change the economic system that the men and women of Britain have value and dignity of service in peace as they have value and the dignity of service in war." These are fine words which call only for dissent in one important particular. On our view of the state we shall hardly expect it to be responsible for changing the system which it reflects. That task we shall rather feel to be one for "the men and women of Britain" themselves. But this view of Beveridge does at least contrast with those representatives of the capitalist class who see the end of the war as an opportunity to plunge once again into a struggle for markets and to throw off all the restraints upon the exploitation of public need which they have been compelled to suffer during the war itself. The writer of an article in the *Bulletin of the Oxford Institute of Statistics*, in analysing the upward trend of building costs, assumes that this trend will continue *when private building is resumed after the war*. There, you see, is a tacit assumption which unless it is challenged is going to frustrate every attempt on the part of Lord Woolton's assistants in the Ministry of Reconstruction to plan a better Britain. The Association of British Architects has said that "in a country like ours where private enterprise

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and profit turns the wheels, causes have to be fought by private endeavour". But this, as it well knows, will be a wholly inadequate medium for the large-scale planning which reconstruction will demand. This will require on the one hand a persistent public demand against which the anti-planners will be powerless and a Civil Service fertile of ideas and eager at the will of the people to carry them into execution. It must be a Service, therefore, much more democratic in structure than it is at the moment. Its classes and gradings must be simplified and reduced in number. There is a strong feeling within the Service itself in favour of a one-grade structure into which every entrant no matter at what level of educational attainment should be recruited. It is a view which owes its strength to two factors, the first, a knowledge of the tenacity of the old-school-tie tradition within the administrative class of the Service, and the second, resentment at the gate-crashing proclivities of the big-business nominee. It represents therefore a sound democratic approach towards the problem of Civil Service structure, but it overlooks another important factor, and that is the educational system of the country. As this stands, and notwithstanding the introduction of a greater working- and middle-class leaven into the universities, the administrative recruit is largely a conditioned product of tradition and environment. But reconstruction, like peace, is indivisible, and the educational system is itself in course of replanning.

The Norwood report has declared in favour of "an education conducted in view of the special life that has to be lived and with the express purpose of forming persons fit to live in it", and it has made recommendations which would, if they were fully implemented, approximate more closely to that ideal. It is clear that if you can effectively democratize the educational system by providing facilities right up to the university to which every child can have access, you have gone most of the way towards democratizing the Civil Service. If your educational curriculum can at the same time provide for special courses in social and political science you have made still further strides in that direction and the net result would dispose

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of many of the otherwise cogent arguments in support of a one-grade service. The next step must be to present a wide area of choice to every entrant into the Service with the opportunity of transfer from one department to another within reasonable limits, and completely adequate training, not only for the duties proper to the department of choice but for the purpose of acquiring a sound knowledge of the structure and organization of the Service as a whole and its significance in relation to a developing society.

Promotion within such a Service there will continue to be, but it will be something very different from the 'carrots' system which embitters far more than it inspires and produces an incentive not so much to give of one's best in reasonably well remunerated service as merely to get on at all costs.

One thing is clear, that in the promotion system of the future there must be equal discouragement both for mediocrity and the superficially equipped 'flyer'. Merit must be the sole criterion and there must be adequate opportunity for its development and discernment. Facilities for post-recruitment training should ensure the fullest opportunity for promotion by qualification to the administrative class and also to any of the scientific and technical classes attached to the various departments.

One of the big problems waiting to be solved by those who seek a Civil Service better fitted for its post-war function is to decide how the vast amount of routine work is to be done. It is inevitable that an increasing volume of mechanized and sub-clerical work will arise. At present it is performed by a mixture of grades, the bulk of it (within the clerical field at least) falling upon clerical assistants recruited wholly into a women's grade. This must at all costs be avoided in future. An improved educational system will produce types at every level which will not rest long content with duties that provide no psychological satisfaction.

Nevertheless the routine work must be done and the only solution lies in its performance during the early years of service by a mixed grade from which advancement to other

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grades can be reasonably rapid. Meanwhile it would be essential to ensure the best possible working conditions including first-class accommodation and equipment for those employed on routine and mechanized operations and to furnish every facility for continued education. One thing is imperative. There must be no helot class in the new Civil Service and no blind-alley, all-women grades staffed on the assumption that a high proportion will automatically go out on marriage.

Another evil we shall need to tackle is the rigid departmentalism which has so unnecessarily complicated the problem of Service organization. The theory underlying the existence of special departmental classes is that the work of certain departments is of such a nature that those who perform it cannot be fitted into the general Service structure. The argument may have some validity in existing circumstances but certainly not in those of to-morrow when, as we hope, with simplified and well-defined gradings running throughout the whole of the Service, with the exception of specialized industries such as the Post Office, there should be no need for departmental side-shows. Common gradings and conditions of service including remuneration should be a feature of a reconstructed Civil Service, and the only exceptions to that rule should be in the case of the scientific and technical staffs which for obvious reasons must be dealt with on specialist though not necessarily on departmental lines. We have already stressed the need for the extension of a larger measure of administrative authority to technicians who in certain departments are qualified to take a share in the determination of policy. That is an obvious essential in a post-war world in which applied science is going to provide the master key. Another essential prerequisite in the creation of a healthier public service is the substitution for Treasury control of a Ministry of Personnel directly responsible to the central government for the work and conditions of the Civil Service and closely linked with the educational authorities of the country to ensure an even flow of recruitment at every level. The establishment officers of every department would come

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under the general control of this ministry to ensure complete co-ordination on all matters of common interest. The good work now being performed under the aegis of Whitley would be continued and extended as a matter of course. The contribution which the staff has made to the greater efficiency of departmental organization would find recognition in the unqualified fulfilment of the Whitley constitution—in letter as well as in spirit.

The right of full participation by the staff in all matters affecting the efficient conduct of public business and a right relationship between Civil Service and public must be fully conceded and extended to the smallest office unit. There is abundant evidence that where that has been done it has had no adverse effect upon discipline. On the contrary, morale has gained by the increased sense of responsibility which a loyal adherence to Whitley principles has inculcated.

There are already big problems calling for almost immediate solution as we enter what we hope are the final phases of the long struggle with fascism. Once again, as we have pointed out, there will be the task of resettling in peace-time jobs the hundreds of thousands of men and women now serving in the forces. The Service must take its quota but at the same time it must safeguard against a repetition of the blunders of 1918, when it pitchforked ex-service men into jobs for which their abilities and aptitudes ill fitted them. Some test of fitness must be applied in the interests of the men and women themselves. This applies also to the thousands of temporaries, many of whom will feel that long service and the experience gained entitle them to prior consideration. That factor must be weighed against the argument that in a total war there can be no such thing as squatter's rights for anyone. There may, for all we know to the contrary, be a period of contraction of the state apparatus immediately following the end of the war.¹ Departments such as the Ministry of Information may close down almost at once. Others, like the Ministry of Food, will have a much longer lease of life. In the final analysis,

¹ Since this was written, a Treasury statement on post-war recruitment has been issued.

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however, everything will inevitably depend upon the extent to which a people's war has led to a people's peace. That assumed, then we can go on to assume a rapid extension of socialization and public control.

We shall hope in fact to be measurably nearer to a socialist state in which the controls are operated on behalf of all the people.

In that event we shall see as the natural corollary of a full-employment policy arising from a planned economy, a rapid growth of the Civil Service in order to carry out the declared will of the people and to give organizational shape to its desires. Those who oppose that conception will endeavour through the hold which they have already obtained over the state apparatus to use the Civil Service to further the ends of a capitalism even more monopolistic than at present. They will demand protection and subsidy to enable them to build up a big export trade at the expense of the home market, and if that carries with it the implication of a measure of state control, they themselves will determine its nature and extent. Such a state of affairs, as we have said earlier, would be indistinguishable in its economic outlines from the fascism which it is the people's purpose to destroy and the Civil Service would be nothing more than its appendage.

With that grim reminder it becomes the business of all of us to welcome every move to democratize the British Civil Service, to free it from the prejudices which interested persons have deliberately fostered and to encourage it to come forward for the first time in history as the representative of the whole of the people.