

CHAPTER 6

THE POLICY MAKERS

THE general rules laid down for the conduct of civil servants carry the implication of undeviating loyalty to the state irrespective of what government may be in power.

No attempt, quite naturally, has ever been made by those responsible for framing these rules to define the state, and one is left to assume that they would do anything to avoid such a responsibility. It must be assumed also that if they were forced to produce a formula it would be one which gave to the state a conception of something which functioned on behalf and was fully representative of society as a whole—otherwise surely it would be unreasonable to expect the unquestioning loyalty of those who served it. But what if we were to proceed on a somewhat different assumption—one for instance which regarded the state as “a special category of people set apart to rule others and who in the interests and with the purpose of rule, systematically and permanently command a certain apparatus of coercion”,¹ or, as “a product of society at a certain stage in development. A power arising out of society but placing itself above it for the purpose of moderating the conflicting economic interests to which capitalist society gives rise”²? Would it not be possible to assert, in the light of what we have already learned of the history of the British Civil Service and even from the conditions of its own employment, the superior validity of these last two assumptions over the first? Should we not be compelled to agree also that none of the development described in the previous chapter has altered the essential character of a state “moulded by the needs of those who control the means of production”?³

Is it not true that the state is still “an instrument to maintain the power of a class”⁴ rather than “the representative of the sum total of the popular will”⁵ in spite of the fact that in

¹ *Lenin on the State.*

² Engels, *Origin of the Family.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

THE CIVIL SERVICE AND THE PEOPLE

the circumstances imposed by the war the state and its apparatus seem to have a certain independence both in relation to the capital class on the one hand and the workers standing in opposition to that class on the other? Let us see how all this works out in relation to the general exhortation to civil servants to be impartially loyal to the state, irrespective of government, and the extent to which the rule is observed in the higher ranks of the Service. We shall require to remember that in this, as in everything else, the law of action and reaction applies.

The Service has in every respect been moulded by the economic context in which it operates, but in its turn it has influenced the general trend of social and economic policy in no small measure. This influence has been exerted in two ways, positively through the policy-making function of the administrative civil servant and negatively through the dead weight of inertia, which has operated always to secure the maintenance of the *status quo*. These qualities are not so much characteristic of the higher Civil Service as such, as of the deep-rooted Toryism which until recently set the tone for it. In its positive aspect it will be useful to examine the case of Sir Horace Wilson, regarded by many as the evil genius of Neville Chamberlain during the most disastrous period of British foreign policy on record. It is impossible of course to say whether Sir Horace would have served the state with equal zeal, irrespective of the government of the day. All we are entitled to say is that although, as the official head of the Civil Service, his real job was, in the words of the Lord Chancellor, "the central oversight of the machinery of government", he did not hesitate at the request of the then Prime Minister to advise him on matters normally outside the range of his official duties. The rest is, perhaps, conjecture, although there is solid ground for the belief that he could hardly have given to a Churchill administration, and still less, shall we say, to an Attlee administration, the sort of 'loyalty' he placed so unreservedly at the disposal of his Munichite chief. The duties of the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury certainly included that of advising the Prime Minister on appointments to certain senior posts in the Service, etc.

THE POLICY MAKERS

(again, I quote the Lord Chancellor), but that hardly included within its scope the far more important task of guiding him through the complexities of foreign policy, especially when that policy leads to the disastrous ends we now see. Lord Vansittart was another distinguished civil servant. *His* advice was not welcomed by the Chamberlain Administration, and he went as we know into the wilderness. But holding the views he does on the completely unregenerate character of the whole German race, one wonders to what extent he also could have occupied a high administrative post under any government whose views on racial theory for instance ran completely counter to his own.

The point to be made here, and it cannot be too strongly emphasized, is that loyalty in the long run is bound to depend upon individual outlook and opinion, as determined very largely by economic and social conditions. So far as the upper ranks of the Civil Service are concerned it will be given in its fullness only when the government of the day represents most faithfully the interests of the class from which they come.

If the government is changed for one which more nearly approximates to the needs and desires (not always consciously expressed) of what Henry Wallace called "the common man", then, I suggest, the influence of the majority of representatives of this class will be expressed more in terms of obstruction and inertia.

These are very potent reasons for the fears entertained by the aforesaid common man when, for example, the appointment of Sir James Grigg as political head of the War Office was announced. Immediately prior to that appointment Sir James had occupied the post of Permanent Secretary in the same Department of State. He was, in short, and notwithstanding a considerable reputation for ruthless innovation, a civil servant of the old school, steeped in its governing-class traditions and averse to any fundamental departure from the *status quo*. We have seen how on occasion after occasion he has run true to type and how in the interest of the reactionary politics in which he is steeped, he has done his best to keep the

THE CIVIL SERVICE AND THE PEOPLE

army, for the well-being of which he is responsible, in political blinkers. Here surely is the classic case of the 'non-political' administrative civil servant becoming rabidly political overnight by a change from one room to another in the same building.

As for the rest of the Civil Service, there are already signs that what was once a job like any other is coming to be regarded as a responsibility, not so much to the state or the government of the day, as to the people. It would be an exaggeration to assert that there has been a serious attempt, except on the part of a growing minority, to define that responsibility in terms, but there is the beginning of an awareness that loyalty, like patriotism, is too vague a concept and that "community sense" might be the better term to express their own sense of what is fitting. But let us get back to the policy-making civil servant. If we can get some idea of his background and the door through which he enters the service of the state we shall be better able to judge of his disinterestedness, or otherwise. We have already spoken of the part played by the Crimean War in bringing about a measure of Civil Service reform. Much of the public criticism aroused by the mishandling of that particular war effort was focused upon the administrative class. Attempts were made to put an end to influences which it was alleged were burdening every department with incompetent officers and they were sufficiently successful to secure the appointment of a body henceforth to be known as the Civil Service Commissioners. This put an end to the era of appointment by patronage and ensured that subsequent appointees should at least possess some qualifications for the job they were required to do.

We can discuss later what that job was. Let us first examine the method by which the qualifications were tested. The examination system has been the object of praise and condemnation in almost equal measure ever since its introduction getting on for a hundred years ago. Its advocates see in it the only reliable method of testing the qualities required in those who aspire to serve the state. Its critics are equally certain that it proves nothing but a certain type of mental agility, or the ability

THE POLICY MAKERS

to cram the requisite amount of knowledge on a number of subjects which have little or no relevance to the duties which the candidate will have to perform. Unfortunately under the present dispensation the critics have been unable as yet to discover an alternative method of selection, which will not at the same time restore all the evils of patronage and jobbery which the examination system was devised to destroy.

But unfortunately also this system is itself not entirely free from defects which on a limited scale may have similar results. The report of the committee set up in 1854 to examine the organization of the Civil Service was forced to admit that so far as the administrative class was concerned, the examination system weighted the scales very heavily in favour of the candidate with academic and classical qualifications. Hence it is that "the administrative class which occupies all the controlling positions in the Home Civil Service consists to an overwhelming extent of the fortunate few who can manage to get to Oxford or Cambridge".¹

This is particularly true of the Indian and Colonial Civil Service. We learn for instance that in the case of the I.C.S. the preponderating number of recruits year by year has come from one or other of these universities. We know too that at these establishments the curriculum favours the candidate with a bent for what are called the humanities, rather than the history or political economy which for administrators one would have thought to be the more useful acquisition. It is true, of course, that there has been some broadening of the basis of university education, but it is doubtful if the slight advance made is sufficient to justify the assertion that the older universities at least are not still a fairly close preserve for a privileged minority. If we go on to assume that the social background of that minority is by its nature bound to encourage a "what I have I hold" approach to the problem of colonial administration it will lead only to one conclusion, which will be that the examination method of entry within the limits of the educational system, as we know it, can only go so far to widen the basis of selection for our administrative

¹ Wm. A. Robson, *The Public Service*, a symposium.

THE CIVIL SERVICE AND THE PEOPLE

officials. "The older generation of empire builders . . . held a firm faith that in dealing with native races, to have an administrative staff of officers and gentlemen was half the battle."¹ Quite so. No 'cads' need apply, in short. And can we be quite sure that this formula passed out of currency with the older generation? How many of our administrators are still imbued with the "Sanders of the River" mentality and outlook? How many of them would regard their self-imposed task of carrying the White Man's Burden as a sacred trust even when the time came to transfer it to native shoulders? We already know the answer to that and we know also its results in India and other areas of colonial administration. Yet, who can doubt that an 'enlightened' university curriculum is turning out quite a number of higher civil servants who in this particular sphere approach the task of 'ruling' the lesser breeds with a high sense of responsibility. Unfortunately, however, *esprit de corps* and an attitude of paternalism are often no more than thin disguises for an obstinate intention to go on ruling at all costs.

We have dealt up to the present only with those administrative civil servants who more obviously carry on the work of central government. But the outlook for good or ill is just as potent within the Social Service and Home Departments. The administration of the Public Health Services, social insurance, Public Assistance and the fiscal system call for qualities of imagination and vision which no examination system in the world can unassisted hope to reveal.

They demand not only a zealous application to administrative processes, but a due appreciation of the social ends to which those processes may lead. Otherwise, 'loyalty' in the narrow sense of the Civil Service code may lead not only to frustration and futility for the individual, but far more important, to highly undesirable social results for the community. It is useless to criticize the civil servant for being hidebound and caste-ridden if at the same time you refuse to define his function in terms of greater clarity. Policy-making, yes—but what kind of policy and on whose behalf? The civil servant,

¹ Leonard Barnes, *The Colonial Service*, a symposium.

THE POLICY MAKERS

like many scientists, may tell us that this is not his business. We shall hardly be expected to agree with him.

The Civil Service Commissioners have introduced another safeguard to ensure the maintenance of the right sort of standard for the staffing of the administrative class. This is the *viva voce*, a hurdle which all candidates are required to get over after they have passed the written examination. It has been argued before by more than one Royal Commission that the introduction of this intimate type of test would be bound to offer scope for class prejudice. This has invariably been refuted by reference to the actual results but the refutation itself lacks impressiveness, since there are all too many cases on record of candidates who have deliberately trimmed their sails in the knowledge of what they thought to be the inevitable reactions of the examiners to social and political questions. The same problem arises in the case of the "present-day" paper in the written examination syllabus, a 'wrong' approach to which might conceivably make all the difference when it comes to getting through the eye of the administrative needle. It seems to come to this—that within the confines of a monopoly capitalism, which by its nature delimits the sphere of operation of its administrators and rigidly defines their function, the examination system is probably the best suited for its purpose.

Professor Laski has become convinced "that our methods of administration produce, above all at the apex of the departmental pyramid, a race of officials who have sacrificed experimentalism and audacity for soundness and the desire to be thought a 'safe' man".¹ To which profound truth it is only necessary to add that experimentalism may be of more than one kind and that we should be well advised to create the sort of social and economic framework for our Civil Service within which it can "experiment" to the benefit rather than detriment of the community. The result of overlooking that necessary precaution might well be to encourage the sort of administrative experimentation associated with the fascist state.

¹ Prof. H. Laski. A paper given to a conference on training for administration on 10th November, 1943.