

The Ideal of Public Service: Reflections on the Higher Civil Service in Britain

Barry O'Toole (Routledge, London, 2006, ISBN 9780714654829, 225pp.)

Published in *The Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 66, no. 2, pp. 248–259

If some men are born Civil Servants, some achieve Civil Service, and some have Civil Service thrust upon them, Oliver Huffam belonged to the first category. No other calling was imaginable for him. His boyhood had been marked by a devotion to rules, a zest for superfluous information, and a most praiseworthy diligence for the prescribed task. He never dreamed of becoming an orchid-hunter in Borneo or a logroller in Canada or an explorer in the Never Never Land in Australia. He took not the slightest interest in South Sea Islands. To him highwaymen were merely evidence of an inadequate police force: pirates were on a par with incometax evaders. When romantic elderly gentlemen asked him what he was going to be when he grew up, expecting to hear of arctic ambitions or tropic enthusiasms which they would encourage with a tip, he always damped them by announcing the Civil Service as his object in life. (Compton Mackenzie, *The Red Tapeworm* 1941)

So Compton Mackenzie introduces Oliver Huffman of the UK's administrative caste. After graduating from Oxford and joining the Civil Service Huffman achieves the exalted rank of Assistant Principal in the Home Office. He was adept at writing speeches for his minister, dealing with his counterparts in other ministries, and making recommendations for the honours lists. But nothing in his socialisation or education had prepared him for the practical task that came his way – the need to dispose of a cast iron bathtub – a task which unsettled his composure and shattered his confidence.

The norms governing Huffman's behaviour, including his distance from the practical world, had been laid down in the 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan Report. These can be summarised as permanence (civil servants kept their jobs through changes in government), neutrality (they were to be politically neutral), and anonymity (responsibility and exposure was to attach to ministers, not to public servants).

These norms were certainly intact in 1941, even if subject to mild ridicule by novelists. By now, however, they appear to be no more than reminders of a time past.

Barry O'Toole, Reader in Politics at the University of Glasgow, UK, has produced a scholarly work, *The Ideal of Public Service*, describing the rise and decline of the British Civil Service, with particular reference to the reforms following the Northcote-Trevelyan Report. O'Toole helps us understand Huffman's distress at being confronted with a practical task, and at the even greater distress he would have suffered if he had remained in the Civil Service to the present day, enduring the reforms of the postwar period.

For the most part O'Toole's work will appeal only to those who have a particular interest in the UK Civil Service. It assumes a great deal of knowledge of British events, traditions, and

institutions. In several places O'Toole refers to what are probably interesting cases, such as the sinking of the General Belgrano in the Falklands War, but he gives no description of these events, simply saying of this and other cases, 'the details are well-known'. They may be well-known in London, but not in Sydney or Canberra. (Would we expect the British reader to be familiar with the details of the AWB scandal?) In this work the reader will need to familiarise himself or herself with esoteric British terms such as 'Whitleyism' (a particularly British form of collective bargaining). It is written for the British reader.

For Australian readers, or, for that matter, any non-British reader, the main relevance of this work lies in a substantial chapter on the philosophy of the public service, in which O'Toole traces the ideas of public service back to Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas and more recently through the Enlightenment philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau. (Unfortunately, however, there is no reference to the equally strong Chinese tradition).

In his chapters on the UK civil service, Australians will find some familiar themes, such as his comments on the documents produced by central agencies, infatuated with the fad of 'New Public Management':

The banal language used in these documents and others published since is suffuse with the jargon used in business schools, management textbooks and the exhortations of business gurus. It is the language the very use of which implies a view that 'business is best'.

And his reference to the relationship of government to the public will be familiar:

Citizens became consumers, ministers became the clients of their officials, who themselves became the clients of pressure groups, think-tanks and private companies, and the public interest became nothing more than the sum of the short-term desires of the public.

He refers to the way ministers have surrounded themselves with a Praetorian Guard of advisers, making policy without the comparatively dispassionate advice and established processes of the public service.

His central theme, however, is a complaint about the passing of the power and status of the Oxbridge civil servant. This fine tradition, he asserts, has given way to crass managerialism. Worse, civil servants are losing their cloak of anonymity and the protection of ministerial responsibility under increasing demands for legal accountability and parliamentary scrutiny. The notion that elected parliamentarians, who appropriate the salaries and running costs of public servants, should have the right to scrutinise their behaviour, is seen as an assault on their privacy.

O'Toole essentially presents two contrasting models – the Oxbridge educated Oliver Huffman and the managerialist who crudely works within private sector methods in disregard of the special needs of public administration.

On the inappropriateness of the latter model many scholars of public administration will be in full agreement. In fact, he could have strengthened his case by making reference to the particular economic situation of the public sector, dealing with market failures, or, as Herman Leonard of Harvard's Kennedy School says, 'the hard jobs are left to the public sector'. However, O'Toole eschews any significant reference to economics.

But how competent are the Oxbridge graduates? While the Greeks, whose traditions O'Toole extols, may have stressed subjects such as mathematics and geometry, do the Oxbridge

graduates have the analytical and scientific skills to handle the complexities of benefit-cost analysis, macroeconomic management, and policies on issues such as global warming and nuclear power? (Or disposing of bathtubs?) Are there not other models which can integrate traditional administrative skills and values with technical knowledge? O'Toole's contrast is too stark, it comes close to presenting a false dichotomy.

Here is where the Australian reader will find his work departs from UK traditions. We have some debt to Northcote Trevelyan, but, from the outset, we took a different path – at times benefiting from the talents of those who would never have risen to senior ranks of the UK Civil Service. Our early governors had no option but to employ convicts to help with the task of public administration. More recently Prime Minister Curtin assembled an extraordinary bank of talent in the Department of Postwar Reconstruction – (Butlin, Coombs, Crawford, Hewitt, Melville, Swan, Tange to name a few), who had far more real-life experience than the precious young men brought into the UK Civil Service. These people formed the core of our postwar public service, and in later years their talents were boosted by many able and creative immigrants who had graduated in British 'red brick' universities – men and women who had the wrong accents and pedigrees for public service in their native land.

O'Toole's book is expensive. It may appeal to a small handful of scholars with a focussed concern about public administration in the UK, but those who want a more affordable, if less academic, description of the UK Civil Service, would do well to hunt through the secondhand bookshops for a copy of Compton Mackenzie's *The Red Tapeworm*.