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# « The relationship between the UK civil service and research: Reforms from Blair to Cameron »

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# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE UK CIVIL SERVICE AND RESEARCH: REFORMS FROM BLAIR TO CAMERON

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of building relations between academics and officials is to produce better policy making, so as to enhance the capacity of public administrations to make policy. In the period under review, from 1998 to 2013, policy making in the United Kingdom has moved to a more open system with more contributors from outside the administration, compared with the closed model that existed earlier in the 1990s, where even the central national body for maintaining links between practitioners and academics, the Royal Institute of Public Administration, went bankrupt in 1992 (Hood, 2011, p. 129). In the Blair (1997-2007) and Brown (2007-2010) administrations, many academics and researchers were brought into government and into new structures within the Cabinet Office, in particular, where they pioneered the use of evidence-based policy making within government. However, as a result of public sector budget cutbacks and ideological pressures favouring the private sector, many of these new structures have been eliminated by the Cameron coalition administration (2010 to present). Researchers in universities and thinktanks are now involved in open policy formulation but remain on the outside of government in newly created "What Works" centres.

### The administrations of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (1997-2010)

The governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were important in two fundamental ways for relations between the world of research and public administration: there was a significant rise in evidence-based policy making; and many academics and leading figures from thinktanks were brought in and given leading roles in the administration or their advice was carefully considered within the policy-making process. Prior to the election of the Labour Government in 1997, a research programme on governance, called the Whitehall Programme, was set up jointly by the Cabinet Office and the Economic and Research Council (ESRC) in 1993-94 (Bellamy, 2011); but there was a noticeable increase in attention to the importance of research after the election, culminating in the publication in 1999 of the Modernising Government White Paper (Cabinet Office, 1999). Andrew Wyatt notes that the White Paper marks "a real and radical departure from most of what had gone before... in the prominence it gives to the need for improvement in policy making." (Wyatt, 2002, p. 15) The vision of the White Paper was clearly articulated at the outset: "We will be forward looking in developing policies to deliver outcomes that matter, not simply reacting to short-term pressures." The emphasis was that the Government "expects more of policy makers [such as] better use of evidence and research in policy making" (Cabinet Office, 1999, p. 17). For example, the Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland that began in 2002 initially took an analytical and evidence-based approach, as policy makers tried to develop a distinctive policy framework in the new political environment of Northern Ireland (Grauberg and Coxhead, 2008, pp. 4-5).

In the late 1990s, there was "a surge of interest in the theory and practice of 'evidence-based policy', both in the academic community and among policy makers," according to Ron Amann, the former chief executive of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and first head of the newly created Centre for Management and Policy Studies in the Cabinet Office (Amann, 2000, p. vii). Two important conferences on evidence-based policy were held in 1999 and plans were announced for a new ESRC Resource Centre, which later became the ESRC UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice, based at Queen Mary, University of London, and which would draw together high-quality research evidence to support officials in various policy fields (Amann, 2000, p. vii; Nutley, Walter and Davies,

2007; Bochel and Duncan, 2007). In 2002, Sue Duncan was appointed the first Chief Government Social Researcher, with the dual role, she writes, of "professionalising the Government Social Research Service, as well as promoting evidence-based policy making." (Duncan, 2008, p. 282).

In order to achieve better policy making, the Modernising Government White Paper of 1999 presented seven challenges for the civil service, as well as 62 action points and 187 milestones (Amann, 2006, p. 345). This plethora of targets was matched by the profusion of management units within the Cabinet Office, which served as a quasi-Prime Minister's Office. Before the 2001 general election, there were reputed to be 32 separate management units within the Cabinet Office (Amann, 2006, p. 350). New structures were established to enable better policy making: first, the Social Exclusion Unit and the Performance and Innovation Unit, which became the Strategy Unit in 2002, when the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit and the Office of Public Sector Reform were also created. All of these units within the Cabinet Office were strongly focused on practical action, such as in energy policy, childcare and drugs policy. Most reports were published not as recommendations but as statements of policy, agreed by Cabinet and backed with resources and legislation (Mulgan, 2006, p. 152). The units were all abolished in 2010 by the Cameron government.

The Centre for Management and Policy Studies (CMPS) was also established by the Modernising Government White Paper in 1999. One of the newly created units within the Cabinet Office, it incorporated the existing Civil Service College and, according to Mark Evans, had "a clear mandate both to establish more productive relations between government and academia in order to generate high quality evidence-based research to inform practice and to consider the broader training needs of the civil service" (Evans, 2007, p. 135). The creation of CMPS expressed a "renewed commitment to research and the involvement of social science expertise in government," writes Michael Duggett (Duggett, 2001, p. 103). However, the location of CMPS within the Cabinet Office, as the historian Catherine Haddon writes, meant that "it was part of the centre of government but the centre was also the commissioner of programmes it offered" (Haddon, 2012, p. 13). CMPS never truly fulfilled its potential role of intermediary between the worlds of research and government, and gradually focused more on being a "development and training body," in Haddon's words (Haddon, 2012, p. 17).

The National School of Government replaced CMPS in 2005 and another attempt was made to bring academics and research into the heart of public administration and policy with the simultaneous creation of an in-house virtual academy, the Sunningdale Institute. The institute brought together just over three dozen Fellows / "thought leaders" in the fields of management and leadership, organisation and governance. They engaged in project work when commissioned by departments to do so. The business model was characterised by flexibility and low overheads, since the Fellows were all based in other institutions and there were just 2.5 staff based in the National School of Government. The strategic position developed by the Fellowship was covered in the phrase "delivering practical wisdom". They were to be a group of persons capable of bringing relevant and high-level expertise from outside and inside government and a group dedicated to using their capability for public purpose.[1]

1 I am grateful to Sue Richards, former director of the Sunningdale Institute, for permission to draw upon unpublished material in compiling this section.

Sunningdale Institute Fellows were engaged in work which gave them insight into how government operates and were treated as peers of civil service leaders, making it more difficult to dismiss their findings and recommendations. Examples of projects involving the Fellows included: a contribution to a strategic review of the Office of Government Commerce; reform of the Government Procurement Service; a review of intellectual capital and knowledge management in the Ministry of Defence; a report on improving leadership across the public sector; the establishment of a network to advise on effective business models; and an evaluation of a major Civil Service Departmental Capability Review (Cooper and Starkey, 2010, p. 167). One of their most influential reports, *Engagement and Aspiration*, provided a narrative on the way policy making should be developed and the changes that would be needed to make it more effective (Sunningdale Institute, 2009). The Cabinet Office published a response, *Listening to the Front Line* (Cabinet Office, 2009), about how the recommendations of the original report were being addressed.

Although the Sunningdale Institute produced very interesting reports, little generally happened with the commissioned work. The challenges encountered were the inadequate follow-up to the reports; the lack of budget, resources and staffing; and the lack of links between the upstream (needs analysis) side of policy making and the downstream (delivery) side. On the other hand, what worked was the peer-to-peer learning; the credibility of the Fellows; and corporate endorsement within the civil service by high-level officials, such as the Cabinet Secretary. It was an example of a cross-government initiative where the lesson learned was that reports needed to be placed carefully with key persons so that they would act on the findings early and would endorse the findings ahead of wider circulation. This personal / personalised nature of UK policy making showed also that top leaders' support was paramount in determining the use of the research in a given ministry. Although seen by some as an analogous body to the Kennedy School of Government in the United States (Council for Science and Technology, 2008, p. 29), the Sunningdale Institute would have required much further engagement with the UK public administration in order to develop into a useful resource.

The Sunningdale Institute also housed the Whitehall Innovation Hub, which worked closely with outside bodies such as the Design Council and the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts to encourage the UK public administration to develop its internal innovation capabilities. According to its director, Su Maddock, ministers had become politically sensitive to publicity that public services were not improving fast enough, for example in response to high reoffending rates or persistent regional and social inequalities, and that civil servants were too slow to recognize the potential of social innovation to public service reform (Maddock, 2012, p. 4). The Whitehall Innovation Hub worked closely alongside some senior officials and produced thought-pieces and briefings for the civil service leadership; its strategy was distinctive because it focused on developing the capacities of civil servants and their ability to become more responsive as policy makers and public commissioners (Maddock, 2012, p. 9). However, as Maddock acknowledges, the Hub was introduced at a time when public service innovation exploration and thought leadership were welcome. Systematising government support for public service innovation swiftly ended with the change of government in 2010. As in the case of its parent organisation, the Sunningdale Institute, it was difficult for a small unit such as the Hub to be effective after it lost its key sponsors (Maddock, 2012, pp. 9, 12).

The National School of Government, including the Sunningdale Institute, was closed in 2012. In an alleged bid to reduce costs and with a clear ideological preference for the pri-

vate sector, the government adopted a "one size fits all" approach to officials' learning and development: no more training would be delivered by civil servants and all such activities would henceforth be operated by the winner of a competitive tender, Capita plc, a huge conglomerate with annual turnover of some £3.35 billion in 2012.[2] So why was there not an option of a "public administration university", along the lines of the École Nationale d'Administration Publique in Quebec? The earlier history of the National School of Government shows why this option was never seriously considered.

The National School of Government had its roots in the Civil Service College, which was established in 1970 as part of the Cabinet Office to provide training programmes for civil servants. The National School was then incorporated into the Centre for Management and Policy Studies within the Cabinet Office in April 1999. The National School of Government then became a separate non-ministerial government department on 1 January 2007. In all of its incarnations, the National School of Government provided a comprehensive range of development expertise and was the principal provider of management and professional training and development for all levels of the UK civil service. With over forty years' experience in designing and delivering training and consultancy programmes for civil servants, the National School was directly involved in the development of more civil servants than any other provider in Europe. There was an extensive faculty of some 75 full-time academic and consultancy staff, plus over 500 associates, many of whom were drawn from academia. All lecturers were recruited with the necessary skills, knowledge, experience and back-up to be able to make practice-based contributions for practitioners. The portfolio contained over 450 training and development courses covering the spectrum of leadership, professional and managerial skills required in government, including leadership and top management development, training for ministers, change management, and a range of professional skills (e.g. human resources, systems and project management, policy analysis, organisational development, government finance, audit, purchasing and training for professional groups) for some 36,000 participants each year.

In the Policy Making and Government section, I led the School of European Studies, which comprised a team of six lecturers (two full-time on EU policy making and four who also taught other policy areas) and three administrators. Two members of the lecturing team were originally university lecturers and the others were on secondment from other government ministries. The National School of Government may have been part of the UK government structure, but it was run like a business and was customer-orientated. Its annual turnover reached almost 30 million pounds, with a very small subsidy from the government. Participants in courses were required to pay a fee, which normally came from their ministerial / departmental training budget. The National School was set an income target by the Treasury, to which each business group was required to contribute. Each member of the teaching staff was given a personal income target as a contribution to that of their business group. Although income was seen as the National School's main measure of success there were also qualitative aims related to the development and effectiveness of civil servants. The Europe team had particular responsibility for helping to achieve the government's aim, as first set out by Prime Minister Blair in 1998, of increasing the level of EU knowledge among UK civil servants and improving their skills in dealing with EU issues.

Throughout its history, the National School of Government grappled with the right mix between the three functions of a national school of administration described by

2 Figures available at http://www.capita.co.uk, accessed on 12 November 2013.

Catherine Haddon: "bulk training for more junior and middle ranking grades of civil servants; senior management development; and the facilitation of high quality research and learning" (Haddon, 2012, p. 7). From its foundation in 1970, the functions of what was then called the Civil Service College included "research conducted into problems of administration and machinery of government questions"; faculty were recruited "to reflect a desire to bridge the practical world of government with the more theoretically-minded academia" (Haddon, 2012, pp. 6-7). In 1987, the College Principal said that he hoped "that the College will find time to contribute to debate in public administration...by its staff writing papers" (Bird, 1995, p. 127). Dame Anne Mueller, the Second Permanent Secretary in the parent ministry of the College, had expressly told the Principal: "we want the College to be something different — more academic, with a raised profile"(Bird, 1995, p. 127).

However, the establishment of the College as an Executive Agency in 1989 meant that financial concerns were to predominate. The "hard-charging model where most of the funding came from fees it charged for courses...was relatively successful financially, but meant the organisation was more likely to be drawn towards the bulk market rather than the added-value of higher level learning and development and academic excellence" (Haddon, 2012, p.7). According to the Guardian journalist David Walker, the Conservatives considered selling or leasing it to a university (Walker, 2011). The advent of the Centre for Management and Policy Studies (CMPS) in 1999 did not solve the conundrum of its functions. Catherine Haddon argues that it was made clear that CMPS "would not be involved in formulation or delivery of policy, nor research for new policy itself" (Haddon, 2012, p. 14). The organisation was also in competition, as Haddon notes, with the newer initiatives mentioned above, such as the Strategy Unit and the Office of Public Sector Reform (Haddon, 2012, p.16). Furthermore, in the competitive environment of UK public administration, many senior officials could not see the personal advantages of CMPS for themselves: Haddon quotes one senior civil servant, who said that it " 'wasn't about support for CMPS', they were 'for the idea, but not the reality' " (Haddon, 2012, p.14). The result was that CMPS continued the traditions of the previous Civil Service College by emphasising its training capacity, instead of research links. The successor organisation, the National School of Government, was meant to tackle once again the problem of the incorporation into a training organisation of research-aware policy analysis, with the creation of the Sunningdale Institute. But, as argued above and also by David Walker, "it didn't become the public administration university its progenitors had envisaged" (Walker, 2011).

With the abandonment of such policy analysis, what was left for the National School of Government? The UK public administration, according to David Walker, "was never clear what the [National School of Government] was really for" (Walker, 2011). There was little support especially from within its parent ministry, the Cabinet Office, where the focus had been on improving civil service "capability" (Evans, 2009, p. 41). Walker writes that Sir Gus O'Donnell, the Cabinet Secretary, "said he hoped the [National School of Government] would start bringing in world experts and help the government draw on world knowledge of public management problems. But that evidently has not happened since he has not emulated his predecessor and gone into bat for the institution" (Walker, 2011). The organisation was not appropriately configured to its political environment. It became apparent also that the senior management of the National School of Government did not understand the extent of the turbulence of the environment; the pace and nature of their responses were insufficient. The last chief executive of the National School of Government

only saw the Cabinet Office minister twice in the eighteen months prior to the announcement of the closure of the school in October 2011.[3]

## The current administration of David Cameron (2010 to present)

Relations between academics and officials have changed since the election of the coalition government in 2010: academics and members of thinktanks are no longer brought into government as such but are consulted in their own right owing to the increasing outsourcing of policy advice from the civil service. There are far fewer officials now: in 2013, there are approximately 415,000 persons in the UK civil service, which works out to a reduction of 23% since 2005 when there were some 538,000 persons employed.[4]

Officials are no longer solely in charge of policy making, but rather act as "policy managers" (Cabinet Office, 2012, p. 16) and coordinators with outside researchers. The Civil Service Reform Plan published in 2012 stated: "Open policy making will become the default. Whitehall does not have a monopoly on policy making expertise" (Cabinet Office, 2012, p. 14). In addition to policy making and analytical functions being shared among ministries, a centrally held match fund, the Contestable Policy Fund, was created to be used by ministers to commission external policy development (for example, by academics and thinktanks): "another way to incentivise the development of high quality, creative policy is to open the policy development process to competition from external sources (Cabinet Office, 2012, p. 15). Hence the first contract from the government's Contestable Policy Fund was awarded in September 2012 to the thinktank the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) to carry out a review into the accountability systems of other civil services.[5] When the eventual study, *Accountability and Responsiveness in the Senior Civil Service: Lessons from Overseas*, was published in June 2013 (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2013), one commentator, Jill Rutter, wrote that "most reasonable policy civil servants could have produced something that looks quite like the IPPR report, particularly if they had access to the international case studies which IPPR leveraged in from KPMG" and sufficient time, "undistracted by demands for briefing and handling the latest crisis" (Rutter, 2013b). Rutter noted also that "these pieces of work may end up yielding useful results but none looks like revolutionising the way policy is made" (Rutter, 2013b).

The Civil Service Reform Plan of 2012 emphasised that the UK civil service could "go further in finding the most collaborative approaches to its policy making": for example, "involving delivery experts early in the policy process, to ensure that the policy can be implemented successfully" (Cabinet Office, 2012, p. 14). The key to current thinking is to integrate research into the early stages of policy formulation, like how to understand the situation and identify options, and not simply at later stages of the policy cycle, such as preparing for delivery. Social scientists now have an opportunity to engage at such an early stage, with examples from one ministry including having sociologists on advisory panels for commissioned research projects (e.g. to advise on approach or method) and being used as sources of "instant" input and advice (e.g. on estimates of public acceptance for proposed

3 I am grateful to a former colleague who wishes to remain anonymous for these insights.
4 Figures available at http://www.civilservant.org.uk/numbers.pdf, accessed on 6 November 2013.
5 See http://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-s-first-use-of-contestable-policy-fund and www.gov.uk/contestable-policy-fund, both accessed on 6 November 2013.

policies / technologies).[6] However, social scientists involved in a discussion with the ministry expressed concern with how questions are defined and framed, and hence with what counts as "useful" or relevant knowledge for policy.[7]

In another case, two ministries, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), have a joint Social Science Expert Panel, composed of twelve social science advisers providing evidence-based advice and challenge to the departments' social research strategy, programme and priorities.[8] The information pack outlining the remit of the panel is to: advise the ministries on how and where social science can best contribute to meeting strategic objectives and commitments; critically assess how the ministries gather and use social science evidence and advice; provide independent critique / quality assurance and peer review of the design and output of social science research and evaluation studies; keep the ministries connected to relevant British and international social science output; provide expert input to specific projects; and draft occasional expert review pieces. The social science advisors attend occasional meetings at departmental offices and contribute a certain number of days of additional work each year. Defra and DECC already have in place Scientific Advisory Panels (DECC Science Advisory Group; Defra Science Advisory Council) and economics expert groups. The multi-disciplinary social science-focused expert panel is intended to support social science within the departments and ensure that it has a clear voice in the policy development process, to complement the voices of natural and physical sciences, engineering and economics.[9]

The creation in 2013 of What Works evidence centres to inform policy and service delivery in tackling crime, promoting active and independent ageing, effective early intervention, and fostering local economic growth points to the further involvement of researchers in public policy, as well as the outsourcing of some civil service policy formulation. The Civil Service Reform Plan stressed that the key test of good policy is the feasibility of implementation: "a clear understanding of 'what works', building on evidence from policy in practice....The Cabinet Office will review the value of creating a[n] institute that can test and trial approaches and assess what works in major social policy areas, so that commissioners in central or local government do not waste time and money on programmes that are unlikely to offer value for money" (Cabinet Office, 2012, p. 17). The What Works centres were launched in 2013 by the Cabinet Office to gather and evaluate existing research on relevant policy interventions. The aim is for them to be "action-orientated, so that commissioners, service providers and policy makers can make use of [the synthesis] in their decision making" (Cabinet Office, 2013, p. 6). The synthesis requires "a common currency, so that policy interventions can be compared on a common basis" and needs to be "presented in a powerful, easy to understand way", with a user-friendly toolkit cited as an example (Cabinet Office, 2013, p. 6). A senior civil servant was appointed as a liaison between the centres and ministers and to advise ministers and government leaders on the effectiveness of good evidence in policy and spending decisions.[10] At CMPS, in 2001, a widely admired policy mak-

6 See "British Sociological Association climate change study group: Report of an informal discussion with DECC," accessed at http://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/48290/DECC_Meeting_Notes.pdf on 6 November 2013.

7 Ibid.

8 See http://archive.defra.gov.uk/evidence/science/funding/documents/2011/seg1100.pdf, accessed on 6 November 2013.

9 Ibid.

10 See www.gov.uk/government/news/david-halpern-appointed-as-what-works-national-adviser, accessed on 6 November 2013.

ing toolkit was developed (Bullock, Mountford and Stanley, 2001; Duncan, 2009, p. 455), but was never integrated into core UK policy-making structures. It remains to be seen whether the appointment of a civil servant as a national advisor will now ensure such full integration of evidence-based analysis.

Another way of including outside researchers mentioned in the Civil Service Reform Plan is to fund " 'Policy Labs' which draw in expertise from a range of people and organisations and provide a unique environment to test new policies before they are implemented" (Cabinet Office, 2012, p. 14). The initial model came about in MindLab in Denmark.[11] A recent British policy lab has been created at Warwick University: the Warwick Policy Lab "will be driven by evidence, not ideology, and will therefore be able to apply best practice in analytical disciplines to policy design and evaluation....Ultimately, it will generate innovative, cost-effective and implementable policy solutions" (Benita and Muthoo, 2013).

Jill Rutter, in an incisive article, notes that the "potential for external experts to engage in policy making depends on their capacity to work to the government's timetable" (Rutter, 2013a). She cites an unnamed UK minister who explained to a research body: "Do you realise that by the time you reach your conclusions, it will be far too late to be of use to anybody. It will be great history, but it won't help anyone make policy." Rutter adds, "This is why what government really values in external experts is not the latest research paper, but accumulated expertise based on long study of an issue, communicated in an accessible form, ideally with clear implications for action" (Rutter, 2013a).

One way that researchers have begun to cope with the time pressures of policy makers is to engage in newer digital technologies and social media, which are seen to be more effective owing to short deadlines. At the London School of Economics and Political Science, for example, the LSE Public Policy Group runs five blogs and twitter feeds on the Impact of Social Sciences: maximising the impact of academic research; British Politics and Policy; European Politics and Policy; the LSE Review of Books; and American Politics and Policy.[12] The project on the impact of social sciences sponsored a conference at the LSE in 2012 entitled "From Research to Policy – Academic Impacts on Government", prompted by the changing nature of the relationship between researchers and policy makers: "That government needs effective research on which to base decisions is obvious. But the link between these two groups has been fragile and key disparities can limit how effective academic research can be for policymakers. Common problems raised are around communication, priorities and openness. Much is known about how the policy-making process happens, what actors are key at each stage and how politics can trump evidence-based policymaking."[13]

[11] See http://www.mind-lab.dk/en, accessed on 7 November 2013.

[12] See http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences; http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy; http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog; http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks; and https://twitter.com/LSEUSAblog, all accessed on 7 November 2013.

[13] See http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/02/21/event-12-march-from-research-to-policy-academic-impacts-on-government, accessed on 7 November 2013.

## CONCLUSION

Although it is too soon to evaluate the current efforts of the UK government concerning open policy formulation, it seems clear, as Geoff Mulgan, former director of the Strategy Unit, has written, that "the civil service will never again have a monopoly of policy advice for ministers" (Mulgan, 2006, p.154). Policy making is now different and will not revert to the traditional "closed" models limiting access to outsiders. There have been huge changes in the context of public administration over the period of 1997-2013, with many institutions having come and gone. The temporal limitations and changing preoccupations of each administration seem to have militated against the establishment of more permanent structures, which might have facilitated contacts between the worlds of research and public administration. For example, a better-fashioned intermediary between these worlds than CMPS or the Sunningdale Institute would have involved creating an institution more targeted at policy making, with greater resources and access to the key decision-making points within the administration. Joined-up policy making, or a whole-of-government approach, would also show that attention to structures is not enough; more attention would need to be paid to cultural change and civil service processes and attitudes (Christensen and Lægreid, 2007, p. 162).

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