

REFORMING THE CIVIL SERVICE

*The Centre for Management and Policy Studies,
1999-2005*

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About the author

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About the series: civil service reform – past lessons

The history of civil service reform in Britain dates back to the seminal 1854 report by Sir Stafford Northcote and Sir Charles Trevelyan. It introduced competitive examinations and promotion on merit.

Successive waves of reform attempts have occurred in the 150 years since. These have been characterised by the political and managerial concerns of the day, but with some recurring themes.

Themes and issues in civil service reform

Today's Whitehall is vastly different from that of 150, 40 or even 20 years ago. However, a number of concerns and characteristics have resurfaced through different reform attempts:

- changes to recruitment and training, including practices, skills and culture
- the structure and constitutional role of the Civil Service
- performance, accountability and leadership.

The continuity of these issues makes it even more important that would-be reformers consider the successes and failures of past attempts.

Central to this are questions of **why** a reform initiative was begun, and **what** it aimed to achieve. But equally important is the question of **how** – the different methods of reform that are open to government. These are deliberate attempts begun with the specific aim of improvement, and differ from reforms that happen tangentially or consequentially.

The Institute has been analysing distant and more recent reform as part of its overall work on transformation and change in government. This case study forms part of that work.

Introduction

The lessons from previous reform efforts in government are not just about the vision for change, but also the motivations behind reform and, crucially, the method by which it is attempted. This is particularly true of the case of the Centre for Management and Policy Studies (CMPS), a Cabinet Office body which attempted to be both a hub for thinking in Whitehall and a body overseeing and providing direction to civil service learning and development through the Civil Service College (CSC). It was created in 1999 and survived until 2005 when it was succeeded by the National School for Government. CMPS had many aims and characteristics that would still be considered highly valuable today and a number of its initiatives continued beyond its lifespan. However, talking to people involved in and around the programme, there is a palpable sense of failure. It is this – not necessarily the ‘failure’ or otherwise of the unit itself, but the perception of it – that is most revealing about CMPS.

CMPS originated out of several parallel pressures for change from different parts of government. As a result it was conceived as a potential solution to quite different problems, depending on the audience, and was pulled in multiple directions. It was trying to be all things to all men, but never quite managed to achieve any of them satisfactorily. It did not provide the support and intellectual push that No. 10 wanted, it didn’t engage with departments as well as it would have wished, and didn’t resolve a number of longer term problems about the right model for civil service training. It existed until 2005, but by 2002 the writing appeared to be on the wall and many in and around No. 10 and Whitehall had gone on to focus on other reform initiatives and to create other bodies. As a case study CMPS provides several important lessons about learning and development in government and, importantly for Whitehall reform, it shows how institutions for change within government sometimes fall victim to the very pressures and cultures they seek to reform. Most essential, though, is what it tells us about the role of the centre of government in civil service reform.

The Centre for Management and Policy Studies, 1999-2005

Background – civil service learning and development

At various stages in the history of civil service reform the focus has fallen upon the way in which civil servants are recruited, inducted, trained and developed over the course of their careers. Traditionally, over much of its history, the UK Civil Service has tended towards a generalist career development and mixed skills, rather than true specialism for certain policy, management or operational roles. Fundamentally the focus has been both about how governments inject the thinking necessary to produce the best policy and also manage the implementation of those policies. More specifically, it has looked at what skills that requires and whether they can be achieved through a homogenous body of civil servants. Debates over the years about whether and how to change this have covered the recruitment and career development of civil servants; the nature of centralised or departmental training for staff; the value and purpose of academic or professional qualifications; and the type of organisations that can best tackle these issues.

The issue of the quality of staff and their capability goes back to the 1854 report by Sir Stafford Northcote and Sir Charles Trevelyan, which called for competitive examination and promotion on merit.¹ Skills and culture have been a recurring issue since, featuring to a lesser or greater degree in most reviews of civil service capability. In the last half-century there was a progression in the value attached to the quality and quantity of such training, and the way in which it related to overall career development, but it was punctuated by certain inquiries. In 1944 the Assheton Report recommended departmental training programmes, but with limited impact.² In the 1960s there was a greater move towards training as means for improving management, including the 1961 Plowden Report on public expenditure management.³ By 1963 the first institution designed specifically for this task, the Centre for Administrative Studies, was established following an inter-departmental review. This was to deliver a 16-week course on general subjects and some skills (for instance on the constitution, public finances, social services, economics, statistics and international affairs). However, this was mostly directed at the lower levels of the Civil Service.

The idea of a staff college, which had been rejected in the 1944 report, was recommended in a 1967 report by a working party under the chairmanship of S.P. Osmond, 'Management training in the Civil Service' and submitted to the broader examination of the Civil Service under the chairmanship of Lord Fulton.⁴ The Osmond recommendations were accepted in full and the creation of the Civil Service College (CSC) was thereafter associated with the wider, and often controversial, recommendations of Fulton. The College proposed would involve residential courses and have three main functions: major training courses in administration and management; shorter courses for the larger body of staff; and research

conducted into problems of administration and machinery of government questions. It recruited its faculty to reflect a desire to bridge the practical world of government with the more theoretically-minded academia.

Throughout the CSC's life there have been questions about the function such a body was to fulfil and whether it was the right organisational model to achieve it.⁵ It can be compared with other national schools elsewhere – those in Singapore, Australia and New Zealand or Canada in particular. It also can be contrasted with the kind of learning and development offered in the private sector or through universities (the Kennedy School of Government in Harvard being a prime example). Fundamentally, the function of these bodies revolves around three things: bulk training for more junior and middle ranking grades of civil servants; senior management development; and the facilitation of high quality research and learning. Working out how to get the right mix through different organisational solutions is therefore not an easy task.

In other countries, the issue has taken a different form, and has led to different solutions, depending on the country, culture and structure of the government in question. In France the *École Nationale d'Administration* (ENA) has both a strong brand and a quasi monopoly on entry to the Civil Service, with students specialising in aspects of public administration and their careers determined in part by final examination. Other countries also recruit from those with law, social and natural science or economics backgrounds.⁶ In the UK civil servants have traditionally recruited irrespective of academic specialism, with limited formal training. In the UK, there was a glance towards France in the Fulton era thinking about what sort of organisation to establish. However, the UK went for something more akin to a staff college, a different beast entirely.

At the other end of the spectrum, and with a federal government made up so extensively of publically appointed officials, the competitive market in US post graduate courses in public administration is arguably headed by the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS).⁷ The success and brand of Harvard and similar organisations and their relevance to public administration careers is now reflected in the growth of Masters of Public Administration courses and similar post graduate courses in the UK.

Origins of CMPS

By 1997-8 there was a growing view that a review of the College was needed. For one former official this was because the CSC was 'doing 180 degrees from what it ought to be doing'.⁸ By this view, it was fairly successful in delivering mass programmes for middle management, but not as well focused on senior leadership and organisational development.⁹ The CSC had originally been funded by a core-vote, which in theory allowed resources to be concentrated where they were felt to be needed. In the 1980s this was changed to a hard-charging model where most of the funding came from fees it charged for courses.¹⁰ This 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.¹¹

Skills and knowledge were believed to have fallen too far behind where they ought to be and not at a sufficiently high level. The Top Management Programme (TMP) introduced in 1985, for instance, was one of the few compulsory training programmes beyond initial induction training, yet it was run by the Cabinet Office. The issue was not simply a greater commitment to development such as reverting to training programmes that lasted months rather than days. The difficulty was that such long programmes of study – particularly mid or late career – were not part of the civil service culture and would not be rewarded by the system; all the incentives were for people to get on with their careers.¹² For some, this was relighting the torch of Fulton, which had controversially, though somewhat inadvertently, described UK civil servants as ‘amateur’.¹³

Alongside this thinking, and part of it, were the immediate pressures of a new and ambitious Labour Government in 1997. When Sir Richard Wilson (now Lord Wilson of Dinton) became Cabinet Secretary in January 1998 it was with a mandate to deliver reform. He was serving a government that was still new, dynamic and impatient to get things done. Senior officials felt the need to prove the Civil Service was capable of modernising and to do so quickly.¹⁴ It was in this context that various reforming strands took off, including the better-known 1999 *Modernising Government* programme.¹⁵ Wilson himself was directly concerned with the role and duties of the Cabinet Office, which included TMP.

In parallel to views that the type of civil service training and development needed to change, there were ‘mutterings’ from Downing Street that the Civil Service more generally lacked any in-house capability to think through issues deeply enough, or to manage expertise and knowledge sufficiently expertly.¹⁶ The No. 10 ‘elite’, including David Miliband, then head of the Policy Unit, apparently saw a lack of high quality research and expertise within government and the potential benefits in something more akin to the HKS.¹⁷ For some in the Civil Service, the issue was more that the centre lacked this capacity, rather than the Civil Service as a whole.¹⁸ However, the concerns from No.10 still represented a need for far better central knowledge management and coordination. If such skills and knowledge did exist, why was it not felt to be in the right places and not responsive enough to the needs of government?

Here, from the start, was one of the central themes and future problems that would face CMPS; where its role was to lie. Was it resolving age old issues about the type of model for civil service capability or about improving strategic thinking and capacity at the centre? Could it do both? And if so, did everyone agree on the best way to achieve it? The answer to the last now seems most clearly to be a no. Conflicting views about its function and mission would affect the design of its organisational structure, the role and choice of its Director, the way in which it related to departments and to corporate civil service management and, perhaps crucially, its relationship with the very political elite whose patronage could make or break it.

Bayly report

The process of rethinking the CSC was underway early in 1998. Richard Bayly, a temporary principal of CSC, had been called upon to consider “the nature of the Civil Service as it faces the twenty-first century and what is expected of it; its consequent need

for development and training; what parts of that should be tackled on a service-wide basis... rather than within departments; [and] what institutional response is called for.”¹⁹ From the start, though, the focus was on the creation of a new body, by focusing on ‘the requirement for a Corporate Development and Training Centre for the Civil Service’ and less on tackling the underlying appetite in the Civil Service for development, which many saw as a bigger issue.²⁰ Reporting in July 1998, Bayly recommended either a Centre for Management *and Organisational Development*, or, as a step further, a Centre for Management *and Policy Studies*.

The main thrust of Bayly’s thinking was building up the Civil Service’s organisational and management knowledge, skills and thinking. It was:

- “to be a “centre of excellence” in best practice in administrative reform, networking with existing research institutions and universities and undertaking, commissioning, or facilitating research, to give a better understanding of what makes for excellence in public governance.”
- “to foster debate and discussion around issues faced by the Civil Service, and particularly its reform and development, developing networks with those leading new management thinking in the UK and overseas and offering access to those with insights into the reform of government from outside.”
- “to help in the detailed definition and development of the new agenda for development and training, leading the vision for the development of appropriate learning opportunities and development and training programmes and arranging their delivery through independent providers or, where appropriate, its own in-house capacity.”²¹

In other words it was to provide a forum for bringing in thinking from outside and generating it inside, as well as commissioning civil service-wide learning and development. But it was largely focused on managerial and organisational aspects of public administration.

Importantly, however, the potential ‘policy studies’ option went further in scope, consisting of ‘a further research capability... to address wider strategic and policy issues’.²² This would be:

... to focus beyond the implementation of policies into the policies themselves, to look at policy issues “over the horizon”, to support the development of initiatives, to evaluate past programmes.²³

From reading the report, the policy studies solution does not seem to be the author’s preference, though in the main annex ‘improving the quality of policy development and advice’ was one of four key competence deficits he identified in the Civil Service.²⁴ Bayly did acknowledge that ‘policy’ was closely related to the organisational and managerial aspects, having ‘a synergy with the inclusive, open, networked, approach needed to drive

management and organisational development'.²⁵ Perhaps the more explicit inclusion for 'Centre for Management and Policy Studies' was part of addressing No.10 demands for more high quality policy capacity; certainly the argument in the report is evocative of later policy and strategy units:

Forward looking strategic analysis is handled by a range of Departmental review units, but the resources to examine longer term issues are sometimes in short supply. A central, corporate, research capacity in this field, drawing in experts from outside the Civil Service, could complement and support departmental work in this area working in consultation with other parts of the corporate centre of government.²⁶

Ultimately, whatever Bayly's preference, the latter option was the one subsequently chosen and announced as CMPS in July 1998. This set the pattern for later arguments. For some, it was a huge mistake and confused the issue; for others the policy studies inclusion was crucial.²⁷ Though CMPS did try to be clear about where it saw its role lying, this issue would form one of the major difficulties in its existence. Whether or not it could be made to work, it complicated CMPS's relationships with departments and with other bodies doing work around policy-making development.

Perhaps most importantly, however, even before CMPS got going it was in competition with a rush of other initiatives. Reform was all the rage. Eventually, the momentum would see a whole host of other units, but more immediately another programme of improvement to civil service talent and recruitment was beginning to take off, and one driven by permanent secretaries themselves. Though the aims were somewhat different from those of CMPS, it would compete over people's appetite for reform and the credibility and results of that reform. The contrast between the way this other effort was achieved and the problems CMPS faced is particularly revealing of the factors involved in effective Whitehall change.

Other reforms – the permanent secretaries group

The wider reform efforts revolved around its most public face, the March 1999 *Modernising Government* White Paper.²⁸ The paper 'drew attention to the newly formed Civil Service Management Committee of Permanent Secretaries' which was to work on translating some of the aims of Modernising Government into reality. As a result, in April 1999, the permanent secretaries were organised into four working groups assigned to be led by one Permanent Secretary each from a major department. They would cover 'vision and common principles, 'bringing in and bringing on talent', 'performance management' and 'diversity'.²⁹ These met fairly regularly and then presented back to the wider permanent secretary group. The explicit thinking behind this was that all permanent secretaries would be consulted at all stages in the process and that this would see greater engagement of the permanent secretaries and by extension their departments. It was intended to be a process for examining *and then implementing* change and in parallel to the Cabinet Secretary's own

work thinking about how to turn the *Modernising Government* agenda into a programme of change that would meet the Prime Minister's ambitions.³⁰

A crucial moment was the two-day Sunningdale meeting of permanent secretaries on 30 September 1999. The four working groups reported back and permanent heads of departments unanimously agreed a five-year programme of action to implement them. It was according to one attendee, an occasion for hard truths.³¹ This was not just the appearance of positive action under pressure from a relatively new government with a clear mandate for change. For many of those involved, it represented a genuine belief that the onus was on them to tackle their own problems rather than await outside intervention. No doubt there was also a desire to have a better control over the process and there were likely personality dynamics at play among the individuals in the group, but for those interviewed there was significant agreement about how well it had worked and how positive the outcome was compared with other initiatives.

Departments were already initiating their own modernisation efforts, and there was a danger that staff would be cynical about 'yet another central initiative' that had not taken into account what they are already doing.³² For heads of departments there was a risk that this central effort could undermine efforts in which they had invested a great deal of personal time and credibility. This was why it was necessary to ensure that engagement at all levels of Whitehall was incorporated into any reform programme. Soon after the Sunningdale meeting, though not before the press got wind, heads of departments sent round notes to their staff on the initial proposals and likely next stages. A Green Paper would be circulated and staff, both individually and through unions, would be consulted, but first there was the matter of ministerial approval, not least from the Treasury, who kept a firm leash on anything with resource commitments let alone what might affect the Treasury's domain, or the perceived balance of power between Chancellor and Prime Minister.

In October the proposals were discussed with Blair and the four chairs of the groups presented their work and progress to date. His reported reaction provides a fascinating insight into the impact he had as Prime Minister over reform. Though publically keen on the issue of reform and the *Modernising Government* agenda, when it came to the detail of management and organisational change some involved question how deeply he was interested in the topic.³³ He discussed the proposals but looked to advice from others as to the quality and competency of the proposals. Of course the pressures and commitments on any minister, let alone Prime Minister, were huge and becoming pre-occupied with the details of management seems a misuse of valuable time. Likewise, the issue of civil service management and reform was considered by civil servants themselves to be something largely in their own domain. Ultimately, he endorsed the proposals subsequently set out in Sir Richard Wilson's December 1999 report, but it is questionable how much he then remained engaged or confident in the changes.³⁴ This was important – and not just for these wider reforms, which are a story in themselves – because the Prime Minister's focus, and that of other senior figures in the Civil Service, was a necessary precondition for the CMPS, which was only just getting started.

Setting up the CMPS

After Bayly had written the report in mid-1998 an advertisement was put out for a Director for CMPS, who would be made a Permanent Secretary. One of the applicants was Professor Ronald Amann. Amann had been head of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for the previous 5 years. He had some experience of government as an academic adviser to Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s on the likely economic fortunes of the USSR. This experience had convinced Amann that if an organisation has access to good, high quality and robust research, and is used to challenging conventional thinking and groupthink, this could be decisive to the organisation's ability to be at the forefront of its field. Amann also, in his ESRC role, saw the value for academia in improving its links with government. Some of the ambitions of CMPS in creating knowledge pools were, for him, a way of engaging academics to want to be involved in government and not just their own careers.³⁵

Amann took up the post of Director as a Permanent Secretary in the Cabinet Office in the summer of 1999 and his first few months were spent in thinking through his own vision for CMPS building on, but going beyond, the Bayly work. This also coincided with the time when the four working groups were moving towards more concrete action plans. It was a heady time for a new arrival, one who himself admitted he was 'unschooled in the ways of Whitehall', and who had his own agenda for reform which seemed to overlap and potentially interfere with this other work. Amann in retrospect felt that this period felt like 'days of hope where everything seemed possible'.³⁶ At the same time, Amann seemed aware of the rush and confusion of initiatives:

'the immediate and overwhelming impressions at the time were those of chaos, clutter, unrealistically high expectations, and institutional friction brought on by a desperate attempt by the large (and ever increasing) number of units within the department to secure and pursue a coherent mission.'³⁷

Amann was keen to see how others approached the task he had been given and visited a range of other organisations, including the World Bank. He saw CMPS best placed as 'an enabling institution' using technology to be able to achieve virtual networks, with fewer physical commitments. CMPS's approach was to be about improving policy making through greater collegiality and project working horizontally across government. CMPS was to help facilitate this and technology would allow it to without a huge in-house research capability. In this way, he planned to bring together academia and others to create communities that the Civil Service could look to for support and high quality thinking, a virtual knowledge bank. Some of the ideas were apparently ahead of their time – this was before the rise of social or knowledge networking sites. But the difficulty was whether and how much Whitehall would take up these opportunities, given the nature of departmental cultures and the incentives in Whitehall career structures.³⁸

Overall, CMPS would focus on two main things: strengthening policy making and building the skills base of the Civil Service. The former it would do partly through both the new

resource infrastructure (not itself involved in the formulation or delivery of policy), but also through new approaches to thinking about how policy is made through departmental peer reviews, promoting policy evaluations and case studies on both successful policy making and leadership in the public sector. Improving the skills of the Civil Service would involve more targeted learning and development and the development of a framework of competencies. It was also to be a hub for the newest ideas on leadership and management, working with others involved in this area in both public and private sectors and academia. It was also to work with ministers as well as civil servants, including induction training and joint events for both ministers and senior officials.

The CMPS that resulted contained four directorates. The Corporate Development and Training Directorate was to provide programmes for civil service leaders and potential leaders, ministerial development and support, high level events (seminars and conferences) to help support policy-making improvements and departmental peer reviews. It was to incorporate the successful Top Management Programme – a development programme for senior leaders which had been around for decades but which were run through the Cabinet Office rather than the Civil Service Directorate (CSC). The CSC Directorate continued the training and development of the wider Civil Service, both departmental and civil service wide, management training and some specialist training, but also consultancy and research in the wider public sector, the private sector and international governments. The Policy Studies Directorate was to do more specific work around evidence-based policy and knowledge management, policy evaluation and best practice. This was perhaps the most ambitious part, and was to find some of the greatest difficulties in working with other parts of the Civil Service. The final Directorate covered Business and Resources. This concerned the management of CMPS itself, its planning, finance, HR, IT, marketing and property. These directorates necessarily compartmentalised the work they were to do. It was important to continue the ongoing work of the CSC, which effectively continued to operate in Sunningdale under the same business model as before. But the project almost immediately developed into various ‘fiefdoms’. It was another aspect of the conflicting aims under which it had been set up.

In theory, it was the decision to house this body in the Cabinet Office, intended to ensure it was less detached from government, which would prove the key to its dynamic. It was part of the centre of government but the centre was also the commissioner of programmes it offered. This was different from either the wholly independent academic approach of HKS, or the separateness of a college whose management was at arm’s length from government.³⁹ It also confused its governance. The CSC had been made an Executive Agency in the 1990s, and then a hard-charging body, but should it now have ‘conventional agency status’ or be ‘a ring fenced part of the Cabinet Office with a separate financial and management framework’?⁴⁰ For some, this issue was an important undercurrent running throughout.⁴¹

Problems

Amann faced three immediate problems as the new Director. One was his relationship with departments, most immediately with other permanent secretaries whom he met weekly at the Wednesday morning meeting. Amann had been made a Permanent Secretary, the

belief being that he needed to have equivalent authority to be able to engage with others. In reality, as many of those who had been around longer acknowledged, the complexities of Whitehall relationships and culture could be inhibiting, and he had difficulties making his case, at least about the wider issues of civil service reform, during these meetings.⁴² Others present acknowledge that they did not make it easy for him; it was a competitive world. It would be wrong to imply that other senior civil servants were wholly opposed or obstructive to CMPS out of principle. As one observer recalled, in many ways it 'wasn't about support for CMPS', they were 'for the idea, but not the reality'.⁴³ And relationships personally were amiable, but some permanent secretary colleagues could not see the relevance of what he was doing and how it helped manage their major reform and delivery agendas. The story of the permanent secretaries meetings is important because it was one means by which CMPS's role and influence could have been fostered.

The second problem that Amann faced was the place of CMPS within the structure of Civil Service management. One of the things that struck Amann early on in his survey of the Civil Service he hoped to improve was the lack of executive management for the Service as a whole. This was something that had also troubled Wilson and led to the creation of the Civil Service Management Board in 1999. But it was not clear what CMPS's relationship to it was. Amann was also reporting directly to the Cabinet Secretary, Richard Wilson, as his line manager. This caused problems, not least because of the huge demands on Wilson's time and the support he was able to bring to bear on Amann's work.

Some of the difficulties the CMPS had can be seen in its governance. The Management Board that was to oversee it was formed of other permanent secretaries, the Cabinet Secretary and Amann himself, but also attempted to integrate the political centre through the inclusion of David Miliband. In addition, there were three members brought in to give an external perspective. However, there appears to have been some confusion about the purpose of the Management Board, specifically whether it was intended as advisory or management in purpose – though the CMPS Report and Accounts refer to it as the latter. Some board members recalled fascinating discussions about the nature of Civil Service learning and development, with many excellent ideas, but few concrete results.⁴⁴ It is also not clear how often Miliband actually attended. This lack of detail about the role of the Board may be attributed to the failure of memory over the passage of time, and the number of other roles its members held, but that in itself is telling about the make-up of the Board and the general confusion in which the CMPS was to operate.

The third issue was that there were other initiatives going on that meant CMPS was in danger of being left behind. One area where CMPS had to tread carefully was on the subject of policy-making. It was made clear that it would not be involved in formulation or delivery of policy, nor research for new policy itself. These were recognised to be the province of the departments and of the new cross-cutting units at the centre. One of the most relevant of these was the Performance and Innovation Unit formed under Suma Chakrabarti in July 1998 to work on 'strategic, cross-cutting issues'.⁴⁵ Amann did not see a remit for his organisation in the making of policy, but he did see CMPS's role in acting as a facilitator. In practice, however, maintaining that distinction and articulating it to wider Whitehall proved more complicated.

As a Public Administration Select Committee report in March 2001 found, the period 1999-2000 was complicated by the mass of efforts in reform:

The 'Modernising Government' programme as a whole is complex and has multiple elements. It is not always clear where the really key priorities are, with the resulting danger that civil servants will endeavour to work methodically on all of them at once. This is a great virtue; but it is also a considerable disability in terms of putting first things first. In our view the immense checklists contained within the 'Modernising Government' programme need to be converted into a much stronger definition of what the key priorities for action are, with clear responsibilities assigned for delivering them. The same applies to the Civil Service reform programme. One key reason for the difficulty in determining priorities is the highly complex organisation of the Cabinet Office itself, with a profusion of small units and divisions all exercising surveillance and issuing instructions from the centre of government. Many of the units—such as SEU [Social Exclusion Unit], PIU, OeE [Office of the e-Envoy] (and its predecessor the Central IT Unit)—have produced some excellent reports. But it remains to be seen how effective they will be in producing durable results.⁴⁶

For some, CMPS's greatest difficulty was that the policy focus was all wrong, based on social policy research approaches for the development of policy, whereas the government, and the Prime Minister in particular, had moved on to thinking about policy delivery.⁴⁷ For others, it was that the policy resource was not sufficient. What No. 10 apparently wanted, or were led to believe they would get, was that CMPS would provide a policy capability equivalent to the House of Commons research department.⁴⁸ Again, this was part of a view that the centre needed a challenge mechanism. However, there were 100 or so people in the Commons research department; according to their 2000-2001 accounts CMPS had over 300 staff, but the vast majority would have been part of the CSCD, not the policy studies directorate.⁴⁹ Some felt that as a result No. 10 became disappointed when they didn't get this resource and soon lost interest in CMPS. More prosaically, the issue of CMPS's relationship with No.10 was about having a 'base' there, being well enough connected to know what was happening there and be able to 'jump in and show relevance'.⁵⁰

2001-2: Other problems, other solutions?

The period around the 2001 election saw a rash of other central units and initiatives. Though each originated out of different needs or had different aims, there was an overarching influence of Blair and his closest advisers wanting to make improvements and

push for a greater impact in delivering outcomes to their policies. Blair, even before the 2001 election, had developed a frustration about the impact of his first term, and with the Civil Service in delivering it. This was one of the reasons behind the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU), established immediately following the general election in 2001 under Michael Barber. To add to the work of Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU), the Forward Strategy Unit (FSU) was created under Geoff Mulgan (and alongside the 'blue skies' thinker John Birt).⁵¹ Around the same time there was the development of the Office for Public Service Reform (OPSR), and in the year following, the creation of the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (PMSU), combining the FSU and PIU.

Though it had been going for nearly two years, CMPS would find itself in competition with these newer initiatives. The problem was not a clash in terms of resourcing or remits, but that, over time, all would draw upon other, less tangible reserves: Civil Service enthusiasm for reform (which obviously massively varied and was far from homogenous); prime ministerial interest and enthusiasm; political capital (both from the PM and to some degree of support elsewhere in Cabinet, especially the Treasury); and, importantly, credibility and brand recognition. This overall profusion of units may have contributed to the general climate, but for CMPS specifically there was a problem where remits crossed on public service reform and in terms of space for knowledge creation. Thus the relationship to the Office for Public Sector Reform, another initiative for reform under the direction of Wendy Thomson, and the space between the two were not wholly clear.

The issue of brand recognition stemmed partly from the support and personal interest of the Prime Minister. The different units may seem wide apart in their aims, methods and expectations, and in their political relationships, but from further away from the centre, such as within departments, there was a perception of multiple voices. Getting conflicting demands for action or reaction (even if just competing for the time of civil servants), the issue became – 'who do I need to respond to, who can I afford to ignore'.⁵² With competing voices coming from the centre, departments often used the private office network to discover what the PM really thought, and what was important. Alongside this was the relationship with the Treasury. Many of those involved only now feel able to acknowledge the degree to which various units and initiatives had to be considered in terms of whether the remit would clash with tasks the Treasury thinks of as its own; this led to duplication at best, and obfuscation or obstruction at worst. For CMPS, and for wider civil service reform initiatives, this was an ongoing and persistent concern. And it is also worth remembering the impact of 11 September 2001. The terrorist attacks would have huge ramifications, not least for those in Whitehall. It became the pre-eminent concern of the Prime Minister and those around him, but also of the Cabinet Secretary and other senior civil servants.

By the summer of 2001, the confusing multiplicity of reform initiatives, units and advisers around Downing Street and the Treasury, and wider *Modernising Government* efforts, were becoming a serious concern, not least for the Cabinet Secretary. There was a lack of overall coherence. And yet, despite this 'ferment over public service reform', CMPS did not seem to be a central player. In October 2001, Sir David Omand, former Permanent Secretary of the Home Office, was made Chairman of CMPS while Amann became its Chief Executive (he had been Director). Presumably part of the thinking had been in ensuring stronger Civil Service engagement and the benefit of the insider knowledge

through Omand. At any rate, CMPS was to focus more on being a development and training body. Increased emphasis was placed on the programmes for ministers, seminars bringing together permanent secretaries and private sector chief executives, and there were to be more programmes on risk management, programme and project management.

In September 2002, Andrew Turnbull succeeded Wilson as Cabinet Secretary. It appears that his vision of the future role of CMPS was even more towards developing civil service management. He had been involved in the team that commissioned the Bayly report. By that time Amann had been in the role for three years and saw that the direction and momentum was likely to change. He decided that it was the opportune time to depart. Meanwhile, Sir David Omand became Intelligence and Security Co-ordinator. The CMPS continued in existence until 2005, largely focusing on its Civil Service College functions and its development under a major Private Finance Initiative (PFI), becoming the National School for Government in 2005.

Conclusion

Some of the lessons that can be drawn from the life of CMPS appear to be of a long-term nature. They go to the heart of questions about the kinds of institutions necessary to support civil service development. They involve the difference between core and specialist training for entrants or ongoing learning and development throughout careers, the latter requiring wider career incentives and changes to Civil Service-wide or departmental cultures. However, there is also the issue of increasing the opportunities for research and sharing knowledge within government. This has, through much of the last 40 years, been addressed in different ways, including the use of internal ‘think tanks’, such as in strategy units. More widely, there are issues surrounding the best ways in which to bring in outside thinking from academia, business schools, the private sector or interest groups and the public more widely. Some of the ideas that CMPS had for bridging these gaps, using digital resources and encouraging cross-government thinking, would be quite relevant to the government today.

The more immediate lesson from CMPS is as a process of setting up a Whitehall institution, or more particularly a centre of government one. To one observer, the story of CMPS was a ‘typical Downing Street process for dealing with a perceived problem’: re-badge an institution and launch, ‘then think that that’s it (job done) then lose interest, fail to resource [it] thoroughly, [with] no [proper] governance’.⁵³ Though this may be a rather strong and simplistic analysis, the issues – the desire to make change, the difficulty of sustaining deep political interest in managerial issues and the urgency to obtain results – were crucial in terms of the support needed to see through and institutionalise long-term change. To another observer, it was ‘over-engineered and under-commissioned’. Ultimately, the model that was created for CMPS was not something that retained strong political and, crucially, prime ministerial, support; it was ‘not on their radar’.⁵⁴

A big issue was in failing to really develop a shared vision of what CMPS was meant to do. The mandate and function of CMPS was confused from an early stage. Efforts to improve civil service skills and capability had become complicated by efforts to contribute directly to the capability and thinking of the centre. Another part of the problem was communication. Some observers felt there was no explanation to the rest of Whitehall about what the intention and remit of the CMPS was. The idea behind the CMPS that emerged, as some saw it, was not clear in terms of whether it was supposed to be a central exercise in improving the overall knowledge management of the Civil Service, or the development of a business school. Critics see this as a fundamental problem in its establishment, that there were diverging requirements for two models. Thus, within a short period of time people started criticising and wondering 'what is this for?'.⁵⁵ CMPS was supposed to be a 'huge splash', 'gritty and modern'.⁵⁶ It never quite seemed to engage civil servants sufficiently. But this was also part of a wider incoherence in civil service reform more generally. From this distance, it is difficult to navigate one's way through the mass of reforms and ideas, let alone to understand the personalities and politics that surrounded them. For CMPS, the problem became how its mandate should be distinguished from other bodies, especially when many were not clear what that mandate was.

It must be acknowledged that one of the issues surrounding CMPS was the Whitehall experience and nous of its Director. The role of the head of CMPS was crucial. However, the job profile was dependent on what role CMPS was to play, something there was continuing uncertainty about.⁵⁷ Amann brought a vision and an enthusiasm to the role, and a great deal of experience in the academic and other external worlds. However, he may have struggled to navigate the political obstacles and culture peculiar to Whitehall. In this instance, as in other cases of external recruitment, it begs the question of how well outsiders cope with the culture of Whitehall and whether more should be done to mitigate it.

To say that CMPS 'failed' paints a confused picture; it existed for six years and some of its innovations were continued into the National School of Government, including the improvements to some of the training and development programmes and particularly some of the ministerial work. One of the most successful parts of CMPS was, according to a number involved, the ministerial development programmes.⁵⁸ For another interviewee, the women's ministerial networks it facilitated were both timely and valuable.⁵⁹ It helped facilitate 360-degree feedback for ministers. Others point out the continuing problems of the CSC being kept separate from the newer development work and research going on in the Cabinet Office – both in the Corporate Development and Training and the Policy Studies directorates – perhaps more so than under the old Civil Service College. The CMPS was also effectively quite short-lived; the high point of existence may have been only between 1999 and 2002.

Ultimately, though, CMPS was never quite able to achieve the diffuse aims of its many creators, nor the specific ones around policy initiatives of its first Director, Ron Amann. Thus, measured against its ambitions, which were high, and the perception of those it was meant to serve, it can be said to have been unsuccessful. Importantly, it is an example of the way in which governments have the ability to create institutional responses to issues, which suffer from a lack of more comprehensive governance and support. The story of

CMPS is not just the story of one failed body; it also represents the continuing difficulties posed by the problems it was set up to resolve. And this does not even take into account the financial cost of the experiment, which cannot be determined here.

CMPS is a reminder of the confusion that has existed for many years about how best to develop and support civil service skills and capability. Many countries have varied approaches to them, with differences as much dependent upon culture as on administrative or political structure. It is therefore difficult, as CMPS found, to attempt to address all the interrelated issues of recruitment, career structures and incentives, departmental silos and human resources, or the question of the quality and relevance of academic qualifications, business or other external experience to government. More immediately it tells us much about the nature of building a reforming unit at the centre of government, the nature of political leadership in such a context, relationship-building, the complex political and cultural issues that inhabit Whitehall, the impact of politics and the distractions of government. Sometimes it is just a matter of timing; CMPS might simply not have developed at sufficient pace to meet Civil Service or political expectations, or it may simply have been before its time.

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- ¹⁰ Sue Richards, 'History of the National School of Government' (Institute for Government, forthcoming)
- ¹¹ Ibid.; Interview with former civil servant
- ¹² Interview with former senior civil servant
- ¹³ The Fulton Committee's reference to the amateur was intended to distinguish the preference for a generalist administrative class, which was characterised by careers that moved them from job to job every two to three years, 'often in a very different area of government activity'. Cmnd.3638 *The Civil Service*, p.11
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- ¹⁹ Cabinet Office, Civil Service College Review, p.1
- ²⁰ Ibid. p.19
- ²¹ Ibid. pp.3-4
- ²² Ibid. p.7
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- ²⁴ Ibid. p.15. Bayly also identified 'management of effective service delivery', 'implementing initiatives better' and 'improving the quality of management in the Civil Service'.
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