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New development: Is this really the ‘end of the generalist’?

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IMPACT

This article has important implications primarily for those concerned with reforming approaches to generalism that have pervaded Westminster model governments over the past 100 years; as well as those connected to, or with an interest in, efforts to professionalize policy-making and the policy advisory function in the UK government. It rehearses the lessons that have been identified through 150 years of reform to the UK civil service in an effort to avoid them being identified again. It also offers new entrants to the civil service food for thought as they choose their early roles.

ABSTRACT

The civil service generalist has been a persistent feature of the British public administration landscape for a long time. This article examines the generalist's origins and the recurring reform agendas that have attempted to reverse this trend. It analyses key civil service reform programmes to provide insights for those connected to, or with an interest in, contemporary efforts to professionalize policy-making and the policy advisory function in Westminster model bureaucracies. Moving beyond generalism is a significant challenge requiring a fundamental rebalancing of priorities at all levels. The overriding objective of this article is to foreground history in an accessible way, so these lessons do not have to be relearned.

KEYWORDS

British politics; civil service; policy advice; policy capacity; policy profession; public administration reform

Introduction

In February 2025, the civil service's Head of Policy Profession, Tamara Finkelstein, announced the ‘end of the generalist’ during an event at the Institute for Government (Finkelstein, 2025). That speech made no reference to lessons from history and no acknowledgement that this was a road travelled by her predecessors. This is an inherently problematical approach and historical attempts at change have much to teach us. The overriding objective of this article is not, however, simply to describe history. It is to observe that the debate around generalism has meaningful consequences for those who occupy policy roles. As the nature of public administration has changed over time, and with it what is required of the civil service, policy work has sadly not felt the benefit of reform. While successive reform programmes have recognized the need for officials to specialize, this need remains in tension with the socio-cultural predilection for generalism. Indeed, this was the general thrust of *Public Money & Management* (PMM) theme issue in 2020.

The term ‘generalist’ is one widely used throughout the literature, but it is very rarely defined. It has been taken to mean ‘amateur’ or ‘all-rounder’ (Committee on the Civil Service, 1968, p. 11); for most researchers (including me), the term implies the absence of a discernible specialism.

Northcote and Trevelyan (1854): the problematic gift of generalism

The civil service at the time of this report was home to the ‘unambitious, and the indolent or incapable’ (Northcote & Trevelyan, 1854, p. 4). It was a service that was inefficient and held in low regard by the taxpayer and the governments it served. The Northcote-Trevelyan report found that staff lacked motivation and the opportunity to

progress, with those joining at the most junior grades having no ability to gain promotion at any point during their career—no matter how long it might last; it was also not usually possible to transfer between departments. The authors found those who did enter the more senior posts did so often as a sideways move from some other failed profession, owing to nepotism or some other quirk of familiarity. These findings were made at a time the state was growing in size and complexity. William Gladstone, who was at the time Chancellor of the Exchequer, therefore asked his Permanent Secretary (then Charles Trevelyan, one of the report's two authors) to propose options to improve the capability of the civil service.

This report proposed that junior staff should be supported, through training, to grow and be promoted into more senior posts and that the practice of excluding them from those more senior posts in favour of external hires should end. In other words, the civil service should move to a system that promotes staff on merit alone. The report also recommended, for the first time, that staff be permitted to easily move between departments; this, as we shall see, is the seed of generalism. While change was not immediate, it did come, following the establishment of the first Civil Service Commission in 1855 and while Northcote and Trevelyan's recommendations have generally enjoyed staying power, their most significant, and most problematic, gift was most likely that of generalism itself.

Haldane (1918): recognizing the need to specialize

Haldane's report highlights the principal reason for its commissioning was that the intent and purpose of many departments had evolved since their inception. In other

cases, departments were rapidly established during the haste of war and lacked a peacetime unifying purpose. In all cases, the commissioning minister felt there was a need to reconsider these matters in the interests of efficiency.

The report begins by making various recommendations on how the Cabinet should be structured and how it should function. It then delivers its headline conclusion: that the civil service is not structured adequately to deliver efficient government in the post-war era; the pre-war approach was no longer fit for purpose. Haldane also criticised the civil service's approach to policy formulation, judging that greater attention should be paid to the quality of officials recruited to do this work. In response to these conclusions, Haldane made a number of recommendations (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1918). These related mainly to policy work being better informed by research through increased engagement with academia and the establishment of external advisory bodies, refinement of the principle of ministerial accountability, increasing collaboration across departmental boundaries, introducing the role of principal accounting officer, increasing the opportunity of women within the civil service and, crucially, that officials should specialize in the work of their department.

Arguably all of these recommendations continue to have some relevance in the civil service today, with the final perhaps possessing the weakest influence given the dilution towards generalism that had begun with Northcote and Trevelyan. Nevertheless, the Haldane report is important in that it was the first to record the need for some degree of specialization, albeit in the work of the official's department—it does not describe specialism in a type of work (like policy). Notwithstanding the longevity of the report's recommendations, and much as was the case for Northcote and Trevelyan, Haldane's recommendations were not well received at the time. Commentators labelled Haldane's approach as one of 'mental mistiness' and the recommendations 'nebulously phrased' (Cole, 1956, p. 138).

Fulton (1968): the first attempt at a solution

The origin of this inquiry is Harold Wilson's speech to the Labour Party Conference in 1964. Wilson announced there was a need to move away from the restrictive amateur practices of the (then) present (Pimlott, 1992). When Wilson later became prime minister in the October of that year, it was perhaps unsurprising that he moved promptly to establish an inquiry to consider the civil service, appointing Lord Fulton as its chair. The inquiry reported in June 1968 (Committee on the Civil Service, 1968). Wilson had been a civil servant during the Second World War and was often thought of as too generous in his criticism of former colleagues; however, Wilson was a reformer with a substantial appetite for change (Kellner & Crowther-Hunt, 1980).

The Fulton inquiry was constrained in its beginnings, as the prime minister prohibited it from considering the machinery of government or the relationship between ministers and officials—restrictions that frustrated its membership (Richards et al., 2008). These restrictions also frustrated Wilson's ministerial colleagues, who felt that many of their failures in government were due to 'defeats in the battle ... against the Civil Service' (Williams, 1972, p. 344). Such views were shared with the inquiry, receiving scorn from Wilson, who felt the issue among those holding

that view was an inability to use the civil service machine effectively, rather than any inherent resistance within that machine (Crossman, 1972).

Many of the issues observed in the Fulton report continue to be felt today. The civil service continues to find competition for talent from the private sector, and the recruitment process is often perceived as slow (Urban & Thomas, 2022). The concept of the generalist was an issue then just as much as it prompts the need for this article today. Fulton argued that officials should 'not be recruited for employment as generalist administrators' and that the 'gifted layman ... has the most damaging consequences' (1968, p. 11). However, very few of Fulton's recommendations on recruitment and training feel familiar today (in particular, the recommendations that staff be recruited into a specialism within which they would stay, and that recruitment as generalist administrators cease—see paras 71–74). What has stayed, largely unchanged, is the inquiry's recommended move to a single, unified grading system that removed the many different classes of official in existence at the time (1968, para. 192).

Fulton's inquiry delivered extensive criticism of generalism. The inquiry described the civil service as 'no place for the amateur. It must be staffed by men and women who are truly professional' (para. 31); the report went on to describe generalist administrators as having 'manifest disadvantages' (para. 38) and brings its criticism together at para. 40:

They do not develop adequate knowledge in depth in any one aspect of the department's work and frequently not even in the general area of activity in which the department operates. Often they are required to give advice on subjects they do not sufficiently understand or to take decisions whose significance they do not fully grasp. This has serious consequences. It can lead to bad policy-making; it prevents a fundamental evaluation of the policies being administered; it often leads to the adoption of inefficient methods for implementing these policies—methods which are sometimes baffling to those outside the Service who are affected by them; and it obstructs the establishment of fruitful contacts with sources of expert advice both inside and outside the Service.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, one of the objectives of the new grading system designed by the Fulton inquiry was, almost perversely, to make it easier for staff to move among the professional groupings that had by then come to exist (1968, para. 214[c]). By breaking down those boundaries, staff were encouraged to go and do very different things, rather than remain within a functional grouping.

Fulton's inquiry led to the establishment of the Civil Service Department (CSD): the first substantive recommendation attempting to remedy the challenge of generalism, that was then already over 100 years old. The inquiry's intention was for CSD to execute the central management functions the inquiry had determined were necessary. These related to recruitment, training, career development, and broader HR activities, the point being to reduce the differences in approach between departments. Its establishment absorbed the Civil Service Commission and many of its functions, particularly those relating to senior appointments. The change was short-lived, as Margaret Thatcher abolished CSD only 23 years later, transferring its functions to the Cabinet Office, which was by then growing in stature. The inquiry also proposed the Civil Service College, which was established in 1970 and

lasted until 2012 (although it was diluted extensively at various points before then—see Public Administration Select Committee, 2013), when it was closed as part of the Public Bodies Reform Programme. Curiously, the last Conservative government intended to open a new physical ‘Government Skills Campus’ on a similar basis to the Civil Service College—although it would not have been able to use the old name as that had been sold, along with training materials, to a private provider (Drewry, 2023) for a derisory £2 million as part of a private finance initiative (Walker, 2011).

Civil Service Reform Plan (2012): what to do about policy capacity?

The Civil Service Reform Plan (HM Government, 2012) was the first programme to explicitly identify a need to increase ‘policy capacity’: defined within the report as relating to ‘the quality of policy advice (HM Government, 2012, p. 14)’. It recognized that policy advice was often of inconsistent quality and delivered with a weak understanding of the challenges in implementation. In saying this, the report’s writers recognized that civil servants did not universally benefit from the skills required to do their jobs to the standard expected by ministers. The authors’ dominant recommendation was to increase the inclusion of external actors in the policy-making process; they left enhancing the skills of officials to action seven and, in practice, this action boiled down to mandating five days of self-determined continuing professional development a year.

The 2012 plan was complemented by a review document published in 2013 titled *One year on* (Civil Service, 2013). It described the launch of a ‘cross-government policy curriculum’ and a week-long course called the ‘Policy School’. Also in 2013, *Twelve actions to professionalise policy making* was published (Policy Profession Board, 2013). It recognized that ‘a multiplicity of reviews have diagnosed similar enduring problems and made recommendations to professionalize’ (Policy Profession Board, 2013, p. 4). The reform plan was reviewed again in 2014 (Civil Service, 2014); it becomes clear in reading this report that progress on improving policy capability had been minimal. This appears largely to be a consequence of a paucity of consideration by ministers over the preceding years—there was no effective community, no staff resource, and no expertise upon which to build (Public Administration Select Committee, 2013). That is perhaps why, by this point, no real progress had been made and the issues that gave rise to the need for the reform continued to be felt.

Later reform: the prioritization of values

After Fulton, reviews into the civil service increased in frequency but decreased in substance (Horton, 1993). The first three reviews described above were pioneering. However, post-Fulton, reports have tended to focus on improving efficiency and reducing headcount; where that has not been their stated focus, it has always been an underlying theme. While departmental efficiency and headcount reduction are often coupled with a commitment to wider reform on skills and capability, demonstrable progress has not been seen in any meaningful sense (Diamond, 2019). I chose therefore to address only one post-Fulton report in this article, and even then, only due to

the substantial discussion of policy-making it contained. In omitting the remainder, I make a number of overarching observations.

Reports have highlighted that a lack of skills is an issue but, rather than proposing to increase the training that officials receive in order to make them more skilful, they have instead concentrated on simplifying administrative processes or increasing digital forms of citizen engagement. When recommendations were subsequently evaluated, they were often judged to have been successful because processing times had reduced rather than because the intervention that gave rise to the process was more effective at achieving its policy goal (Richards & Smith, 2016), or because officials had become more effective in implementing it (Richards et al., 2008). Part of this arises out of the fact that these reports were often written in an attempt to reinforce the cliché that the civil service remains the ‘Rolls-Royce’ of national administrations, so as to indicate that everything must change while simultaneously remaining unchanged (Richards & Smith, 2016). A topic that sits apart from reform, but that has nevertheless been labelled a relevant factor in this discussion on generalism is ‘churn’; that is the speed at which officials change jobs. The recognition that officials change jobs too quickly was made by both Fulton and Haldane and has been viewed as problematical by Parliament and a range of researchers since (see, for example, Diamond, 2019; Pickles & Sweetland, 2023; Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, 2018; Public Administration Select Committee, 2013). In simple terms, the problem relates to the prioritization of values. To prioritize breadth of experience and professional mobility (or generalism), and relating promotion prospects to those factors, is to militate against the development of specialized policy knowledge (Gleeson et al., 2011). This tendency towards mobility and the generalization of policy knowledge has undermined governmental performance (Lodge & Rogers, 2006).

Establishing the policy profession: a vehicle for change?

What matters is what is rewarded

The absence of a monopoly for the civil service in policy-making or the provision of advice to ministers on policy is not new (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992). However, the breadth of sources of advice outside of the civil service has grown substantially since the early 1990s (Halligan, 1995) and as ministers have turned to others for policy advice, officials have refocused onto other things, with this refocusing coinciding with the erosion of the advisory capacity available within government (Dunleavy, 1995). Dunleavy, for example, discusses how officials now enjoy membership of a managerial cult, where officials:

... most resemble journalists in their capacity to quickly get ‘up to speed’ on key issues, dream up attractive intellectual arguments, and quickly ‘present a case’—but also in their inability to interest themselves in large volumes of data, cope with competing theoretical perspectives, understand complications, or work through the interactions of intricate social and technical systems (1995, pp. 62–63).

This problem was summarised well by Jonathan Slater (previously permanent secretary in the Department for

Education) who said 'what matters is what is rewarded' (Slater, 2022, p. 18), in a play on New Labour's commitment that 'what matters is what works' (Pemberton, 2010, p. 45). The corresponding changes in civil service culture have also been studied (Reeder, 2020). In practice, this means that if a type of work, or developing a capability, is not helping an official to get promoted, the official will not prioritize it; it has been argued that doing policy-making well can prove contrary to an official's promotion prospects (Stevens, 2011). Instead, officials are incentivized to become 'fartcatchers' (Gendreau et al., 2002, p. 369), who servilely follow ministerial direction because they lack the expertise to know better. In an attempt to reverse this trend, the civil service has sought to professionalize.

Professionalizing policy-making

John Oughton was a Cabinet Office civil servant responsible for the Efficiency Unit. The Oughton report, published in 1993, looked at career management and succession planning. It challenged the predilection for favouring the recruitment to the senior civil service of those who had done many different jobs rather than those with more focused experience (Efficiency Unit, 1993, p. 3). The Oughton report also proposed the introduction of 'career anchors' (1993, p. 8), which would bound the generality of an official's career. This is the first time a substantive recommendation was made for undermining the trend of generalization, beyond merely complaining about it, and it underpins the later development of the formal policy profession. The recommendation was accepted by the Cabinet Office in *Continuity and change* (HM Government, 1994) but did not progress substantially in the subsequent 10 years until 2004, when *Civil service reform: delivery & values* (Cabinet Office, 2004) revived career anchors.

The focus on professionalizing policy-making was revived in 1999, as part of the *Modernising government* white paper (Cabinet Office, 1999a). This was brought to life when the Cabinet Office's Strategic Policy Making Team published a report titled *Professional policy making for the 21st century* (Cabinet Office, 1999b). This, for the first time, proposed a set of core competencies that a policy official should possess. The report highlighted that training for policy officials was inconsistent, and that overall improvement would likely require a 'route map' if officials were to acquire these competencies. However, the report proposed no strategy for taking this work forward, instead highlighting that it would be for individual departments to decide how to respond to the recommendations, with the Centre for Management and Policy Studies (CMPS) having a major role to play. CMPS survived only until 2005, when it was subsumed into the National School of Government under a private finance initiative. It was ultimately an ineffective organization that lacked a clear sense of purpose (Fawcett & Gay, 2005). It was also the case that many permanent secretaries at the time did not care about the nature of the challenges CMPS was attempting to solve (Amann, 2006).

Pinpointing conception

The work discussed in this article paved the way for the establishment of a more coherent professional grouping of officials, the overriding objective of which was to improve

standards. While some amount of organization had brought policy officials together at various points in history, the precise conception of a lasting, formal grouping of all policy officials across Whitehall is difficult to pinpoint. It did not exist at the time of *Delivery & values* in 2004, but it certainly existed in theory by 2008, when the government published *Building professional skills for government: A strategy for delivery* (Government Skills, 2008). This is reinforced by a search of the National Archives' UK Government Web Archive (n.d.), which returns no hits for 'policy profession' before 2008, when it returns two; in each of 2009, 2010 and 2011, it returns in the tens before 2012 when there are 23,450 hits. However, further interrogation of that data shows that standards for policy officials had been drafted as early as 2005, albeit unpublished, as part of early work on the Professional Skills for Government programme. While the Policy Profession as an organization may have existed ethereally at some point before 2009, it was not until January 2009 that the Policy Profession Executive Board was established to lead work in this space, led by Sir Brian Bender as its first head (Government Skills, 2009a). Nevertheless, by 2019, the Policy Profession remained without any core funding (Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, 2019) notwithstanding the fact that a central support unit was first set up in 2009 (Government Skills, 2009b) and core funding for it was recommended as early as 2013 (Sasse & Haddon, 2018).

Concluding thoughts

This article has shown that the generalist civil servant is akin to a cat with nine lives; *The end of the generalist* is definitely a movie we have all seen before. While Tamara Finkelstein is highly likely adopting a sensible approach in emphasising that finally retiring it will take several years, officials in the Policy Profession Unit must pause to reflect upon the lessons this history can teach us before making their next move. Undoing generalism will be difficult, as it requires a fundamental rebalancing of the priorities of policy officials. Jonathan Slater's comment is poignant; this rebalancing of priorities must be reflected in the demands of ministers and senior officials alike, and come to heavily influence factors such as performance-related pay decisions and an official's promotion prospects, so that the overall reward strategy drives the normative change required. This realization leads to the conclusion that it is improbable the Policy Profession Unit will be able to solve this issue alone unless ministers dedicate meaningful attention to the task.

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