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A Chequered History but Positive Future for British Public Administration

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ABSTRACT

Public services, public servants, and the study of Public Administration are operating in a context of global turbulence. Our review of the state of the discipline suggests that a core strength of British Public Administration has been the complementarity between scholarship and practice, responding to existential threats. We analyze changing relationships between the discipline and practice in British public administration over three eras: Applied, fragmented, and impactful. The applied era saw mutual exchange, but a lack of criticality. The fragmented era was one of a retreat to over-specialization and identity crises. The impactful era has tried to revivify synergies but has struggled for coherence and criticality. Looking to the future, the nascent sub-field of Positive Public Administration is identified as providing an opportunity to radically redefine the scientific quality and social relevance of the discipline due to the way it blends constructive engagement with independent criticality.

1 | Introduction

Western democracies, including the US and the UK, are facing extreme levels of turmoil and turbulence (Ansell et al. 2023). Growing frustrations and resentments are contributing to a democratic crisis (Flinders 2021) and democratic backsliding (Kippin 2024). A multitude of sociocultural and economic grievances have been suggested as causes of this democratic crisis (Berman 2021). These challenges form the context for our historical analysis and lead to a focus on the current existential challenges faced by public servants when faced with populist politicians who seek to dismantle democratic safeguards and politicise bureaucratic structures. Within the UK,¹ some have pointed to the End of Whitehall (Campbell and Wilson 1995; Diamond 2018) and others have argued that the traditional relationship between officials and Ministers has fundamentally

changed (Rutter 2022). How can Public Administration² scholarship best respond to the challenges posed by such turmoil and turbulence?

In the UK there is a long history of pessimism about the future of the discipline of Public Administration with scholars variously describing discontent (Ridley 1972), decay (Elcock 1991), crisis (Boyne 1996) and demise (Greenwood 1999). More recently the turbulent and polarized political context has generated considerable academic interest and commentary on government failure (Freedman 2024), blunders (King and Crewe 2013) and fiascos (Campbell and Wilson 1995; Diamond 2018). Overall, the position of British Public Administration has been summarized as suffering from “a combination of disinterest from practitioner organizations, disregard from universities and disaffection from many academics” (Elliott et al. 2023, 262).

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Evidence for Practice

- The history of Public Administration in the UK shows both the benefits and challenges involved in promoting knowledge exchange between research and practice.
- Practitioners played a significant role in the development of the discipline in the pre-War period, and a range of mechanisms were created to facilitate knowledge exchange between research and practice.
- By contrast, the latter part of the twentieth century saw a disconnect between the two communities as government embraced private sector practices and many scholars focused on theory-building.
- In the last two decades, the UK government has invested in new knowledge exchange structures that are intended to re-connect public administration scholarship with practice, but there are concerns that this may compromise academic independence.
- The emerging sub-field of “Positive Public Administration” seeks to fundamentally re-orientate where and how scholars focus their attention in a way that can redefine the relationship between practitioners and researchers.

In an earlier assessment of the state of British Public Administration, published in PAR in 1996, Rod Rhodes concluded that:

In short, we have to prove once again that Public Administration has something to contribute to understanding the institutions of government in their multiplying, manifold guises. The prospect may not be welcome, but it is challenging.

The lessons from the last 30 years offer a timely warning of what might occur in other Western democracies and how academics may best respond. We take this opportunity to revisit R. A. W. Rhodes' (1996) analysis, to consider this in the context of the last 100 years, and to provide some suggestions for how Public Administration can respond to turmoil and turbulence by drawing on a positive approach. This paper offers an overview of the discipline in Britain,³ focusing on the following questions: how has British Public Administration research evolved over time? What does this history tell us about the academic discipline's relationship to the practice of public administration? And why are the notions of Positive Public Policy and Positive Public Administration emerging as such important analytical lenses within British Public Administration research?

2 | The Evolution of British Public Administration—Taking a Historical Perspective

In this country study, we identify three distinct periods in the discipline of British Public Administration over the last century. The rationale for this approach is based on a recognition

that history matters (Raadschelders et al. 2000). Taking the long view gives us the opportunity to explore the ebb-and-flow of historical pressures and, through this, to assess the key variables likely to shape future politico-administrative relationships. Identifying eras or periods in public administration analysis is always going to be contentious as historical periods are never discrete entities but reflect gradual shifts in emphasis over time. However, many have noted the importance of history to a broad understanding of Public Administration (Stivers and McDonald 2023; Spicer 2004). For example, Raadschelders (2020) identifies three ages of government as starting with the beginnings of humanity. Often these historiographies have also taken a US-perspective (Vogel and Hattke 2022). But for our analysis of the discipline in the UK we take our starting point as the 1920's with the establishment of the Institute (later Royal Institute) for Public Administration and the publication of *Public Administration* as the first UK-based academic institute and journal for our discipline.

In their contribution to the 100th anniversary special issue of *Public Administration*, Vogel and Hattke (2022) suggest five eras of PA scholarship: (i) *Foundational Years* before the mid-1940s; (ii) the *Post-War Etatism* era until the early 1960s; (iii) the *Administrative Localism* era from the mid-1960s until the early-1980s; (iv) the *New Public Management* era in the 1980's and 1990's; and (v) the *New Public Governance* era from the 2000's onwards. For a fine-grained understanding of some of the divergent aspects of each period, we would concur with the picture they set out. For our purposes however, we have chosen to collapse down into three periods with distinctive sets of common features. Many of the characteristics of the *Foundational Years* era also reflects R. A. W. Rhodes' (1996) analysis. These periods are characterized by close practitioner-academic links and a general sense of methodological simplicity. Based on those features, they are combined here with the *Post-War Etatism* and *Administrative Localism* eras. Similarly, we believe the *New Public Management* and *New Public Governance* eras could be combined as they both represent greater methodological rigor alongside a growing divide between academia and practice. In developing this country study we draw on our collective experience as Public Administration, public policy and political science scholars working in universities across the UK. A bibliography of useful sources on the history of British Public Administration, which has informed our analysis, is provided in Appendix A.

The country studies invited by this journal have responded to a call to examine the general state of the discipline in specific country contexts, and to also focus on the nature of the “relation between the study and the government in your country” (Willoughby et al. 2024, 9). Our characterization of the three eras is an attempt to categorize, very broadly, the nature of those relations in different stages of the discipline's maturity to date. We identify the three key periods of British Public Administration as: applied; fragmented; impactful. We conclude by celebrating the ways in which relationships between public administration practice and Public Administration scholarship have become more differentiated. We call for a turn towards Positive Public Administration as a response to ongoing turmoil and turbulence. Looking to the future trajectory for the

TABLE 1 | A timeline of key disciplinary and practice developments in British public administration.

Era of public administration	Key disciplinary and practice developments
Applied public administration (early to mid-20th century)	• Establishment of key learned societies—Joint University Council for Social Studies (JUC) 1918/Institute for Public Administration (IPA) 1922 (later Royal Institute)/Political Studies Association (PSA) 1950. • Haldane report 1918—Report from the Machinery of Government Committee which brought about the functional organizing of government departments and the independent allocation of research funding to universities. • Establishment of first public administration academic journals—<i>Journal of Public Administration</i> (now <i>Public Administration: An International Quarterly</i>) 1923 / <i>Journal of African Administration</i> (now <i>Public Administration and Development</i>) 1949 / <i>PAC Bulletin</i> (now <i>Public Policy and Administration</i>) 1964. • Robbins Report on higher education and subsequent expansion of universities 1963. • Establishment of the Social Science Research Council 1965 (later the Economic and Social Research Council) to promote and support research in social science subjects. • Fulton Committee on the Civil Service 1968 which recommended more training of civil servants, creation of a Civil Service Department, a unified grading system, a greater role for specialists, and the introduction of policy advisers. • Establishment of the Civil Service College 1970 to improve management and training across the civil service at campuses based at Sunningdale, Edinburgh and London.
Fragmented Public Administration (mid-20th century to early-21st century)	• Privatization of public corporations 1979—formerly nationalized industries including British Telecom, British Airways, British Gas, British Steel, and British Rail were privatized from the late 1970's onwards. • The <i>Journal of Administration Overseas</i> which had been established by the UK Government Colonial Office as the <i>Journal of African Administration</i> in 1949 was sold to Blackwells-Wiley and renamed <i>Public Administration and Development</i> in 1981. • First Research Assessment Exercise 1986—established as a mechanism to allocate research funding to universities based on a peer-reviewed assessment of research quality. • Next Steps agenda and establishment of arms-length bodies 1988—initiative to bring about greater efficiency by creating arms-length executive agencies that would operate in a business-like manner semi-independent of government. • Citizen's Charter (1991) introduced by UK Government to strengthen consumer voice and choice in public services. • Demise of the Royal Institute for Public Administration (RIPA 1992)—financial challenges combined with a lack of government support led to the closure of the RIPA and the sale of its assets. • Sale of <i>Public Administration</i> from RIPA to Blackwells Wiley 1992. • Nolan Principles of Public Life 1995—established after a series of high-profile scandals these principles were intended to restore public trust in government. • Civil Service Code 1996 was introduced to set out the standards of behavior expected of civil servants • Dearing Report on higher education and introduction of student fees (in England, Northern Ireland and Wales) 1997 • Introduction of National Student Survey 2005—a survey of all final year undergraduate degree students to assess their opinion of the quality of the education they have received. The results are published annually and are intended to increase transparency and inform student decisions about where to study. • Introduction of Teaching Excellence Framework 2017—as a counterbalance to the Research Excellence Framework, the TEF provides a government assessment of the quality of teaching that takes place in universities in England. Universities in other UK nations can opt-in to the assessment.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Era of public administration	Key disciplinary and practice developments
Impactful public administration (Early-20th century to present)	• National devolution in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales 1999—the establishment (or reenactment) of devolved national government in Wales and Scotland was designed to bring decision-making closer to citizens. In Northern Ireland national devolution took place as part of an international peace treaty called the Good Friday, or Belfast, Agreement which was signed in 1998. • Launch of UK Parliamentary Academic Fellowship Scheme 2016 to facilitate greater knowledge exchange between academic researchers and the UK Parliament. • Cities and Local Government Devolution in England 2016 to foster economic growth and address regional inequalities. • Places for Growth programme, including second Cabinet Office HQ in Glasgow 2020, as part of move to have more civil servants based outside London. • Establishment of Leadership College for Government 2022 to develop leadership skills, capabilities and networks across government and the wider public sector. A new National School for Government and Public Services was announced in early 2026. • The Independent Review of Governance and Accountability in the Civil Service (Maude Review) 2023 made recommendations including the introduction of a new Head of the Civil Service, that Ministers should have a greater role in civil service appointments, and an annual review of the policy advice given by civil servants to Ministers. • The JUCPAC rebranded as the UK Association for Public Administration (UKAPA) 2024 following a major governance review in order to better meet the needs of the academic public administration community in the UK. • Development of first QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Public Policy and Public Administration 2025—this is the first statement of nature of public policy and public administration and expectations about academic standards expected of graduates in these subjects. • Impact and Engagement increased to 25% of research quality in REF 2029 in order to shift emphasis from the individual academic publications towards the impact that research has on policy and practice.

discipline, by adopting a positive (as opposed to positivist) lens we are able to identify, defend and imagine a bold future for the discipline and practice.

3 | The Three Eras of British Public Administration—Changing Relations Between Academia and Practice

We characterize the three eras of British Public Administration: *applied*; *fragmented*; and *impactful*. The eras broadly correspond to a chronological timeline though we recognize that such categorisations are not discrete, mutually exclusive periods. We remain wary of the risk of homogenizing what is an inevitably differentiated landscape. The elaboration of these three eras is a conceptual tool to illustrate how relations between academia and practice—one of the central questions in British Public Administration—have evolved over time.

In summary, the first phase covers the initial development of the discipline in the early 20th century as an applied social science. Many of the contributors to the published literature were civil servants reflecting on their work, albeit within the limits

of a literature dominated by a narrow canon, and perhaps with a lack of critical distance. Many mechanisms of exchange were created and flourished. A second phase in the late 20th century was characterized by fragmentation and growing distance between the discipline and practitioners within an environment that was more ambivalent about, or even hostile to, university-based research and researchers. It saw a series of identity crises played out in public. However, the second era also saw strides being made that laid groundwork for potential deeper synergies, through advanced theorisation and more diverse methodologies. The third era of British Public Administration emerged in the 21st Century, characterized by stronger links with practice and opportunities for knowledge exchange. However, the impactful era has posed risks of research being instrumentalised or co-opted. Scholarship also tended to focus on failure to the detriment of more explicit considerations of successful public policies.

Key events illustrate the characterisations of each era, shown in the historical timeline in Table 1.

We now extend this summary of the eras, expanding the key features of each era in the relationships and synergies between the discipline and practice.⁴

4 | Applied Era

The “applied” era broadly aligns with what R. A. W. Rhodes (1996) described as the era of Traditional Public Administration as well as some of the Era of Eclecticism. It begins in the immediate post-World War I period, where the discipline was beginning to take shape, with a flourishing infrastructure for exchange and reflective practice. During this time the UK government was investing significantly in the development of public administrators as well as in the expansion of Public Administration as a distinct area of study. Professionalization took place against a history of public administration being seen as an art performed by untrained amateurs; in the language of the time, government was considered to be: “an art, reserved for “gentlemen” [sic.] or “all rounders,”” and not a science for professionals (Dimier 2006 drawing on Barker 1944).

There was the creation of new infrastructure to facilitate the development of the discipline and to support relations between scholarship and practice (see Table 1). Such infrastructure included the establishment of learned societies to cohere and give reputation to the discipline, the creation of new journals as places where practice-based research could be published, and organizations that offered vocational training and space for reflexive practice for public administrators. Such infrastructure also then created incentives for the relationships, for example providing destination journals for research and reflexive pieces, and physical spaces for learning and knowledge exchange.

For example, the Joint University Council for Social and Public Administration (JUC) was established in 1918 by a group of academics and practitioners (Chapman 2007), and later the Institute for Public Administration (IPA) was established in 1922 by practitioners, particularly from the Society of Civil Servants (Nottage and Stack 1972). The IPA (later Royal Institute for Public Administration or RIPA) published the first English-language academic journal in the discipline, the *Journal of Public Administration* (now titled *Public Administration: An International Quarterly*) in 1923, and this was edited by John Lee (who was also Controller of the Central Telegraph Office, GPO). The *Journal of African Administration* (now *Public Administration and Development*) was established by the UK Government in 1949 and edited by George Cartland (a UK Government civil servant). Here we can see how the study and practice of public administration were, in their infancy, intertwined.

Parallel developments in the professionalisation of the civil service and wider public service include the Haldane Report in 1918, the Fulton Report in 1968 and subsequent establishment of the Civil Service College in 1970 (see Table 1). These were intended to enhance the professional functioning of government. The 1968 Fulton Report led to the establishment of the Civil Service College to better equip civil servants, particularly in relation to management skills and knowledge. This in turn helped to foster closer links between the emerging profession and the emerging discipline, such as vocational education for administrators. Many of the contributors to the published literature were themselves practitioners, typically civil servants within the UK government, often reflecting on their own work. At this time, scholars were often practitioners, and the discipline offered a

space for reflective practice. In this sense, the relationship was synergistic, but arguably lacking in valuable critical distance.

Throughout these early years of British Public Administration scholarship there was a predominant focus on the affairs of the Home Civil Service, local government, and public utilities including the nationalized industries, within Britain. An important exception to this is represented by the academic journal *Public Administration and Development* which was established in 1949 to support the withdrawal of Britain's colonial administration in Africa (Elliott et al. 2023). In retrospect, we can see a disconnection between academic work on processes of dismantling the British colonial system and the operation of public administration systems within the home nation/s. Broadly, it could be argued there was a lack of sufficient or explicit recognition in research at the time of the colonial lens through which knowledge was being produced, including, for example, knowledge about public administration in African countries. Such gaps have started to be picked up in later scholarship attempting to decolonise PA, as we will see in the third era. However, at the time of the first era, the main academic journal of British origins (*Public Administration: An International Quarterly*) ironically did not feature much by way of international or comparative research up until the 1990's (Aoki et al. 2022). Instead, the subjects of development studies and international relations (where there has typically been more heightened critical awareness in research of inequitable global power dynamics) developed largely in parallel to Public Administration with their own academic journals, learned societies and conceptual approaches.

Whilst this period is broadly marked by synergetic relations between the Public Administration discipline and public administration practice there have always been underlying tensions. The creation of the IPA was described with distaste by a senior Treasury official as a: “glorification of the bureaucracy. We are unpopular enough already, God knows, but I tremble to think how we should be regarded if we consciously assumed the airs of superior persons” (Nottage and Stack 1972, 284). Similarly, there has never been an equivalent of the Minnowbrook Conferences in Britain.

Another distinctive feature of British Public Administration at this time was in the approach to theory. The fact that practitioners were often scholars had the benefit of offering a space within the discipline for practitioners to reflect on their own practice, but this scholarship was often highly descriptive, based on personal experience, and lacking methodological rigor. Indeed, research in the applied era has been critiqued as “not only atheoretical but hostile to abstract theorizing,” in contrast to the approach taken by US-based scholars (Dargie and Rhodes 1996, 326). In addition, the close, symbiotic relationship between academia and practice also posed a risk to the future of research where the political landscape and post-war consensus was about to change.

Whilst there were strong links between the UK Government (particularly through the Civil Service College) and academia (through the JUC and RIPA) up until the 1980s, this is where relations started to chill (Chandler 1991), bringing in a new era in British Public Administration.

5 | Fragmented Era

The fragmented era commenced in the late 1970s and early 1980s when relations between practitioners and academics of Public Administration became increasingly fragmented. This corresponds to the latter stages of Rhodes' Eclectic Era as well as the Era of Ideology.

Whilst the applied era was one of expansion and flourishing academia-practice relations the fragmented era saw a growing questioning of the function of the state and of the value of Public Administration research. This was reflected in the collapse of the post-war consensus and growing dominance of New Right neo-liberal ideology. Key developments in practice included the privatization of public corporations and the establishment of arm's length executive agencies that would operate in a business-like manner semi-independent of government (see Table 1).

The hollowing out of the state (R. A. W. Rhodes 1994) and de-privileging of the civil service (Hood 1995) presented an existential threat for Public Administration scholarship. Successive governments were less receptive to academic PA knowledge and instead saw business thinkers, management consultancies and think tanks as preferred sources of research and advice, in the rise of the "consultocracy" (Mazzucato and Collington 2023; Kirkpatrick et al. 2023). Meanwhile universities were increasingly subjected to more metrics-based performance management and pressure to generate their own income through commercial activities. Performance management of the sector as a basis for funding was introduced from 2008 onwards through Research Assessment Exercise (later Research Excellence Framework). In its early phases, these processes and metrics incentivized international quantitative research and theory-building over qualitative, longitudinal or local studies as had previously been seen to define British Public Administration.

At the same time much of the infrastructure that had supported close relations between public administration practice and Public Administration theory in the applied era was either privatized, sold off or shut down. In 1981, the journal *Public Administration and Development*, which had been established by the UK government in 1949, was sold to Blackwells Wiley in association with the RIPA. In 1992, the then Conservative Government refused to financially support the RIPA, and it was then forced to close (see Table 1), with its academic journal (*Public Administration: An International Quarterly*) being sold to Blackwells Wiley. And, in 2010, the incoming Conservative-Liberal Democratic Coalition Government closed the National School for Government, and the former Civil Service College buildings at Sunningdale campus were sold to a private developer (see Table 1).

Together, these developments contributed to the sidelining of opportunities for shared reflection between the discipline and practice. This led to a series of disciplinary identity crises and introspections with diagnoses of the state of the British discipline ranging from decay (Elcock 1991) to crisis (Boyne 1996) and demise (Greenwood 1999). Together with Rhode's influential 1996 piece, these were "dodo accounts" of the "decline and fall" of British PA (Hood 2011: 128). Academic research increasingly focused on what was going wrong with public

administration—citing blunders, fiascos, and disasters of government (King and Crewe 2013; Gaskell et al. 2020). Such works had a broadly warm reception, including by civil servants keen to subject the work of government to scrutiny in order to achieve better public value, and have honest appraisals of policy. But the "mood music" created by such works was to spotlight the inabilities of governments, at a time of low public trust in the power of administrations to solve problems.

Yet in comparison to the applied era, in terms of academic research, the fragmented era of British Public Administration saw a great increase in the amount of research being produced and in international collaborations. Academic work in this period built on the solid empirical grounds of the applied era to strengthen the intellectual and theoretical contributions of the discipline. A greater diversity of methodologies and concern for rigor was also an emerging feature of this period. This was characterized by growing specialization of academic work on specific research topics, which deepened knowledge on narrow fields, but also meant this period was one of a retreat to over-specialization. One particular critique of this era was that in the face of attacks on "[t]he authority, expertise and impartiality of civil servants," academic Public Administration had "retreat[ed] into scholasticism or, at the other extreme, a kind of highbrow management consultancy" (Pollitt, quoted by Bouckaert and Massey 2018, 428 and 429).

Many of the challenges identified in the second phase of British Public Administration reflect those identified in the US Public Administration: "the strong increase of quantitative-statistical methods, the decline of practitioner authors, and substantive specialization to the extent that generalists' perspectives are losing ground" (Raadschelders 2011, 140). What was needed now was a return to a more constructive relationship between Public Administration theory and public administration practice.

6 | Impactful Era

The twenty-first century has thus far been characterized by uncertainty but with a growing sense that governments, and universities, must do more to demonstrate their value and impact particularly in the face of growing populism and the questioning of democratic norms.

Whilst the era of applied Public Administration was characterized by expansion, and the era of fragmented Public Administration by retreat from dialogue with practice, the era of impactful Public Administration is perhaps best characterized as renewed engagement (see Table 1). In a contrasting "phoenix account" (Hood 2011, 128) of this era of PA, examples of its resurgence include the re-establishment of the Civil Service College, initially as a virtual entity, then as the National Leadership Centre, and most recently the Leadership College for Government. This has coincided with the development of professional standards for the policy profession and for line managers, and growing momentum for developing a sustained infrastructure. An early 2026 announcement by the UK Government to establish a new National School for Government and Public Services (NSGPS) follows some momentum behind such a move. For example, a 2024 recommendation by the House of Commons

Liaison Committee (Flinders, Cairney, and Elliott 2026), and recommendations for a new physical Leadership College campus being described by the then Prime Minister as “an eminently sensible and plausible idea” (B. Smith 2024). Although it remains unclear how the new NSGPS will facilitate the mobility of knowledge and skills across boundaries, or build upon existing investments that operate at the nexus between research and policy (Flinders, Elliott, and Riley 2026).

Devolution has expanded and a greater emphasis has been placed on localism by successive governments. This includes a commitment to having half of senior civil servants in regional offices (outside London) by 2030 (B. Smith 2025). Linked to this is a growing number of local funding schemes to support partnership working and regional economic development. For example, with the development of City Region Deals, universities have typically been central to partnerships, such as with the Glasgow Riverside Innovation District and Changing Futures Northumbria. Similarly, investment into four Local Policy Innovation Partnerships (LPIPs) across the four UK nations (UKRI 2023) is supporting networks of universities, local partners and government to promote regional economic development, and Health Determinants Research Collaborations (HDRCs) are building partnerships between local councils, universities, and community groups to address health inequalities. These initiatives demonstrate a greater recognition of universities as anchor institutions within localities that have an important role to play in regional development and in providers of evidence for policy.

Another significant trend within the discipline has been the emerging body of work seeking to decolonise and diversify work in the discipline, with a more clearly articulated focus on equity and social justice. For example, this era saw theoretical developments to add a gendered lens to the intellectual repertoire of the discipline, such as the growth of feminist institutionalist analysis (Mackay and Krook 2010; Mackay et al. 2011; Kenny 2014; Waylen 2017; Lowndes 2019; Durose and Lowndes 2023). Others have conceptualized anti-racist institutionalism and epistemic justice as approaches to analyze the mechanics of racialisation, how institutions can be implicated in the (re)production of racial inequalities and how institutions can play pivotal roles in the pursuit of racial equity (Dadze-Arthur 2022; Dadze-Arthur and Mangai 2024; Eseonu 2024, 2025).

Likewise, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (the mechanism through which government research funding is allocated to universities) has changed to take into account the importance of academic research having a concrete impact on policy and practice. Impact was introduced for the first time in 2014, and in a subsequent round in 2021 its weightings were increased to 25% of the total criteria. Some academics have raised concerns about the ways in which the REF has instrumentalised the impact agenda towards a cynical game of scoring well on assessment criteria (Blagden 2019). Potential synergies have been tainted with suspicions of people acting in bad faith (e.g., game-playing, over-claiming, boosterism, etc.) (see Overman 2014). Although the direction of travel may shift in the future towards institutional eco-systems, under the banner of “research culture,” the REF has also been criticized for over-emphasizing work by

individual academics rather than focusing on the institutional landscape that underpins more meaningfully engaged research.

Concerns have also been voiced about the degree to which academics could act as critical friends to government. Advocates for useable social science and relevant research have warned of the risks of co-option, which could result in a paradoxical outcome that the most impactful scholars are the least relevant—“impotence through relevance” (Flinders 2024). A lack of distance and an instrumentalised impact agenda may incentivize a “Faustian bargain” whereby scholars tone down their traditional criticality and independence as the price they pay for access to large funding streams and to be demonstrably impactful. Although the most relevant scholars in terms of truly transformative socio-political potential are dismissed and set aside as unproductive and therefore of little value (Flinders 2024).

Within the academy, the learned society (JUC) has been relaunched as the UK Association for Public Administration (UKAPA), signaling efforts to reinvigorate the discipline. Linked to this the first Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) published the first subject benchmark statement for public policy and Public Administration. Yet the teaching of Public Administration remains significantly lower than during the era of applied Public Administration (Elliott et al. 2024). Similarly, constructive developments towards re-engagement with academics as valued experts have been tempered by the realization that the discipline may not be the obvious go-to for policymakers. The practice relevance of other disciplines and fields, such as science and technology, planning, and public health, was in some parts arguably clearer, more constructive, and more advanced than in Public Administration where the negativity bias and policy fatalism (Mulgan 2025) has continued to dominate.

The era of impactful Public Administration is therefore one that has much promise and opportunity, but it remains to be seen whether Public Administration academics will rise to the challenge of engaging meaningfully and positively with practice.

7 | Looking to the Future: Towards a “Positive” Era?

Our argument so far has centred on the shifting relationship between the discipline and practice of British Public Administration. A key part of the value of Public Administration scholarship is in the mutual exchange with public administrators, in order that the discipline makes a contribution to the sustained operation of public administration particularly in times of turbulence.

We can see the synergistic roots of the Public Administration as a discipline and practice in the “applied” era. However, the fruitfulness of this synergy was limited by a lack of criticality. The “fragmented” era, in some ways, saw a flourishing of both practice and discipline independently, but in narrow ways, that also neglected potential synergies, with the discipline and practice increasingly talking past each other. The “impactful” era has signaled an intent to revivify the synergies between discipline and practice but has struggled to create coherence and allow for

criticality in a more diverse knowledge ecosystem. So, where do we go from here?

One area with untapped potential is the “positive” movement in Public Administration which encourages PA scholars to look at success as well as failure (and the many variants of success within failure, and failure within success), and to learn from these. A positive lens is a counterweight to an extant bias within the discipline focusing on blunders, failure and fiasco (King and Crewe 2013). The key reason that a positive lens matters for the relationship between research and practice, is that learning from more and less successful examples in public administration could underpin a potentially more productive relationship between academia and practice. Being able to share knowledge and expertise about successful forms of public administration is one way that research can strengthen practices. Others have advocated for Positive Public Policy (PoPP) for the same reason, as a way of re-constituting the relationship between academic disciplines and practice (Cairney et al. 2024; Flinders et al. 2024).

In their seminal call for a new positive approach, Douglas et al. (2021) drew on Elinor Ostrom's work which called for social scientists to understand examples of what worked in practice and use those to build theory. We follow Douglas et al.'s lead in applying a similar mode, using Ostrom's thinking as a provocation for how we might move forward. Here, we take as a starting point Ostrom's conditions for co-production. If the aim is to foster new synergies between academia and practice in knowledge production and exchange, then lessons from co-production seem apt. How then could a new “positive” era for Public Administration be ushered in?

In developing her work on co-production, Ostrom (1996) identified a series of “myths” in common understanding that are relevant to our understanding of how a “positive” future for British Public Administration may be developed. Applying these insights would encourage us to first recognize that Public Administration as a discipline is no longer—if it ever was—the single or primary producer of knowledge or analysis relevant to policy practice, and to resituate the discipline within a rich and diverse policy and knowledge production landscape. Second, that we need to abandon an implied contempt fostered in the “fragmented” era for those working in government. Instead, we should recognize that government does not consist of practitioners who are “simply bureaucrats,” but of sophisticated and reflective actors, often with similar educational backgrounds to academics. Third, that in a context of democratic backsliding, Public Administration as a discipline and as a practice have a crucial role to play in supporting effective practices of public administration. The tendency within the discipline to focus on failure and fiasco not only offers a limited basis for learning. The changes that are required for PA to better support public administration in a positive future include valuing applied knowledge as highly as academic expertise (Walker 2010; Durose and Lowndes 2023). The discipline does not always know best or indeed have all the answers. Chiming with Janine O'Flynn's (2025) recent remarks, humility is relevant here. Humility encourages more relational modes of operating (Bartels and Turnbull 2020), grounded in mutual respect. Fostering synergy with practice

needs a consideration how to situate the discipline within a rich and complex knowledge-policy ecosystem, rather than assume the primacy of academic knowledge over other forms of expertise. More synergetic engagement is likely to emerge from an openness on both sides to collective learning.

Ostrom identified a series of conditions that may help nurture positive synergies between Public Administration as a discipline and as a practice. The first of these is that each has something that the other needs. This simple statement belies a complex challenge that underpins the perpetual labelling of the discipline as one in crisis due to its inability to articulate its value to practice. Ostrom encourages a “complimentary production possibility frontier” rather than a merely substitutive one Ostrom (1996: 1082). Indeed, we have seen that the role of the discipline of Public Administration as a space of reflection fostered in the “applied” era, was subsequently lost as the discipline pursued its own ends and was in effect replaced. A positive approach could help to foster complementarity in contemporary policy making by articulating what the discipline could offer—resource, learning, exchange, emphasis on success and the value of government. In the context of ever-greater diversity and hyper-pluralisation, another fruitful area for shared learning will be through the inclusion of postcolonial and de-colonial knowledges in PA scholarship, building on existing work such as documented above on anti-racist institutionalism, and a gendered lens on PA.

The second condition is that options are available to both scholars and practitioners. In this context, the insight here is that there is no one particular way to achieve a synergy between discipline and practice. Indeed, in the proliferating examples (Lucas et al. 2024) of what Positive Public Administration may look like, strength lies in the diversity and richness of exchange between the discipline and practice. The depth if not the diversity of exchange was evident in the “applied era” and has been chipped away at since. The “impactful” era has seen a re-building of this to some extent. This, however, remains fragmented, marginal and partial: a difficult to navigate proliferation of engagement opportunities, which are often short-term, limited in number and focus on developing individuals rather than institutional cultures, and which favor the centre of government and often disciplines other than Public Administration. We also need to remain alert to the need to place criticality at the core of engagement and avoid mistaking relevance for influence. PPA may offer a cohering narrative and sense of purpose, which avoids over-instrumentalising the discipline.

The third condition is a credible commitment to the coproduction of knowledge. In Ostrom's work, this is vital to ensure reciprocity. This is perhaps the condition that we are furthest from in British Public Administration. However, we could look to how a growing number of UKRI (UK Research and Innovation⁵) investments are premised on a shared mapping of the problem space, to identify challenges to which policymakers and academics can each contribute to solving (Ayres, Newman, Bates, et al. 2025; Ayres, Newman, Sandford, et al. 2025). More broadly, this condition encourages one to focus on the relational infrastructure between the discipline and practice, which is not always best developed through a model of time-limited competitive funding.

Ostrom's fourth condition is that incentives should be available to both sides to encourage inputs. In the "impactful" era, the Research Excellence Framework offers an incentive for academics to give consideration and priority to the societal impact of their research. Its unintended consequence has been to privilege a particular kind of relevance that can lack valuable criticality. Flinders et al. (2024) has commented on the particular kind of challenge that the current impact agenda poses to a broader discipline—political science—premised on critical engagements with questions of power. The question of incentives is also potentially fraught from the practice side where, although valued (Talbot and Talbot 2014), academic expertise can be considered hard to reach or meaningfully engage with in a deeply political environment, and where AI is increasingly seen to offer a potentially convenient "fix" to knowledge gaps. Recognition of the need to reform policymaking from within government has long been evidenced. Positive Public Administration and Positive Public Policy are only likely to gain traction and credibility within practice where it can also demonstrate its congruence with what government is trying to achieve (Cairney et al. 2024).

8 | Conclusion

Our review of the state of the discipline suggests that a core distinctive strength of British Public Administration has been the complementarity between scholarship and practice. In line with the "positive turn" seen in studies of policy and administration internationally (Ansell et al. 2023; Cairney et al. 2024; Compton and Hart 2019; Luetjens et al. 2019; De La Porte et al. 2022; Lindquist et al. 2022), the idea of "Positive Public Administration" (Lucas et al. 2024) or Positive Public Policy (Cairney et al. 2024; Flinders et al. 2024) has emerged as a basis on which to re-constitute the discipline in the 2020s, by rebuilding constructive and critical relationships between public administration practitioners and academic researchers. When a positive lens is applied to Public Administration, it directs us back to assess these core aspects of the discipline; that is, the synergies between the discipline and the profession. A synergistic relationship would arguably be one in which the various parties worked collaboratively together, bringing useable knowledge to bear on urgent issues facing administrations, leading to change.

We have illustrated how the relationship between the discipline and practice in UK Public Administration has evolved over time: from the intimacy of the early "applied" era, to the flourishing in disconnection of the "fragmented" era to the attempt to rekindle synergy in the "impactful" era. We reflected on how synergy may be nurtured in the future, using the work of Elinor Ostrom as a guardrail. As Ostrom remarks, designing institutional arrangements that help to induce successful synergy—here between the discipline and practice of Public Administration—is, and remains, daunting. "Positive public administration" does, however, provide a timely call to action.

Attuning our scholarship to how public administration works might also contribute to an articulation of its value (Lucas et al. 2024; O'Flynn 2025), as a protective measure in turbulent

times. This is not about a naïve co-option of the discipline in service to practice. Rather, it is a call to forge a new relationship between criticality and engagement, one that is aware of the complexities and constraints of everyday policy and administration, but nonetheless works pragmatically towards success. Doing so would also allow new sources of evidence and data to be mined, creating opportunities to learn that might not be visible with a bias towards failure. In these ways, the discipline of British PA could, in some small part, help nurture a more balanced public debate about not only the problems but the potential of public administration. Therefore, what links the history and the future for the discipline in a British context is a positive and engaged approach.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

¹ We acknowledge that the terms 'Britain', 'British' and 'Britishness' are multi-faceted and contested. The United Kingdom consists of Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) and Northern Ireland. Many of those who live in the UK consider themselves to be British whilst there are many others, particularly in the devolved nations (Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales), who may have multiple identities including Scottish and Welsh. There are many others who live outwith the United Kingdom who have British citizenship and who may identify as British including those within British Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies each of which have different constitutional, legal and political relations with the UK Government. There are also some Commonwealth Countries that share the British monarch as their Head of State albeit they are independent nation states. For more on identity and politics in the UK see, inter alia, Henderson and Jones (2021). *Englishness: The political force transforming Britain*. Oxford University Press.

² We are following the convention, as per Waldo (1948) of referring to the practice as public administration (all lowercase) and the scholarly subject as Public Administration (capitalized).

³ There are devolved governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales each of which have their own political mandate and powers over devolved matters of policy, including education and health, and are accountable to their own Parliaments/Assemblies. Scotland also has its own separate legal system which predates the Act of Union between England and Scotland which created Great Britain in 1707. The UK Government, officially His Majesty's Government, has control over reserved matters which include national defense. There are three civil services in the UK: the Home Civil Service, the Northern Ireland Civil Service, and the Diplomatic Service. This makes identifying 'British' public administration a rather complex endeavor. Here we follow the Common Law principle of precedent. Historically, most scholarship on British public administration has focused on the Home Civil Service which covers UK central Government departments as well as civil servants within the Scottish Government and Welsh Government. For the purposes of this article we are continuing with that convention—which is to say that we are not including a detailed analysis of the practices of the UK Government in Northern Ireland or in Overseas Territories and other parts of the Commonwealth.

⁴ For a fuller discussion on the teaching of Public Administration see (Bottom et al. 2022; Elliott et al. 2023; and Elliott et al. 2024).

⁵ The UKRI is a non-departmental public body that is responsible for funding science and research on behalf of the UK Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

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Appendix A

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