GOVERNMENT: A SUITABLE CASE FOR TREATMENT?

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Government – its institutions, its working, its constitutional controls – is hugely important, not just as a subject of gossip or history in the making but as a discipline. Rod Rhodes’ achievement in pioneering new ways of mapping and analysing developments inside government from the inside, and in coordinating so many different academic studies, was a remarkable model of the sort of research into government that can be, and needs to be, done by universities, not least as a basis for training future practitioners. The Whitehall Programme showed what can be done.

When I accepted the Mastership of Emmanuel College in 2002 on leaving the Civil Service, a distinguished Oxford academic commiserated with me. It was not just the usual rivalry between the two universities. He told me that he had spent a couple of years in Cambridge earlier in his career and that he had found it ‘a desert’ for anyone interested in the serious study of government.

I felt a pang. During my time as Secretary of the Cabinet, and indeed before then, I had visited Oxford on numerous occasions, both as a Visiting Fellow of Nuffield College and at the invitation of Vernon Bogdanor, David Butler and numerous others, for discussion of current trends in government. I had found these contacts challenging and instructive. Indeed I had had useful contacts with academics from many universities over the years, and had become convinced of the contribution their work could make to the better working of government. I had applauded in 1992 when Sir Robin Butler, then Head of the Civil Service, had called for a closer association between senior officials and the increasing number of researchers who studied and wrote about what they did.

Like others I had been delighted when the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) decided to fund what became known as the Whitehall Programme. Under Professor Rod Rhodes, its ‘inspirational Director’ in the words of the late and great Ben Pimlott who chaired it, the Programme comprised 23 projects between 1995 and 1999 and cost £2.1 million. It truly was ‘the most ambitious investigation of British central government ever undertaken by independent scholars’ (Pimlott 2000). Pimlott was right to see it as an exercise which would have a cumulative influence. Rod Rhodes’ achievement in pioneering new ways of mapping and analysing developments inside government from the inside, and in coordinating so many different academic studies, was a remarkable model of the sort of research into government that can be, and needs to be, done by universities, not least as a basis for training future practitioners.

I had also benefited greatly from regular seminars, sponsored by the British Academy, which I had inherited from my predecessor, Robin Butler, and which I co-chaired with Ben Pimlott, at which academics from a variety of universities debated current trends within government, even as they were happening.

I am not an academic. My only research resource is 36 years spent in government. But I do believe from that experience that government as a subject of academic study, drawing...
together the threads of different disciplines, is not only proper but of importance. It may be helpful to explain why.

WHAT DO I MEAN BY THE STUDY OF GOVERNMENT?

First, what do I mean by the study of government? I mean the study of the institutions of the state: the monarchy, the government, the civil service, parliament, the judiciary and the courts, local government, quangos, the armed forces, the intelligence agencies and so on. I mean the internal workings of these institutions, their relationships with one another and with the outside world, not least the media, the way their roles may evolve over time and their effectiveness. I mean the regulation of power, principally but not exclusively by the constitution: who wins it and how they win it and, once won, how they use it and eventually lose it.

These are huge subjects which offer plenty of room for many fulfilling academic careers. There are many great academics – not least Rod Rhodes – who have devoted much of their lives to shining beams of light into the darker recesses of government, to the edification of the rest of us. This tribute is no mere politeness. While there is much general interest in the workings of government, there is a particular benefit to practitioners inside government who from time to time most definitely need the support and illumination of outside thinking. There is no one more isolated than a senior official or government minister, cut off by the requirements of confidentiality and a senior position from talking about what is going on.

I look with some affection now on the curious collection of books which I had on my shelves in the Cabinet Secretary’s room: an early edition of Ivor Jennings’ Cabinet Government (1947), a much thumbed copy of Hennessy’s Whitehall (1989), Rodney Brazier’s Ministers of the Crown (1987), which rescued me on one dire occasion, although I realized recently that I may have misquoted it, Geoffrey Wilson’s Cases and Materials on Constitutional and Administrative Law (1976), Rod Rhodes on Transforming British Government (2000a, b), the Fulton Report of 1967, the Organisation of Central Government by RIPA (1957), Peter Barberis on The Elite of the Elite (1996), Walt Patterson on nuclear power (1976), Louis Blom Cooper on capital punishment (1953), and so on. To ask for help would quite often have been out of the question because of the need to avoid embarrassment; but to be able to consult the writings of an authoritative academic was a real help.

But much more is needed. We are still only at the beginnings of the study of government in the UK. In this article I can only illustrate briefly a few areas where I think more research would be of benefit. And if in the process I turn out to have failed to read some seminal publication with which everyone else is familiar or to be ignorant of a major project of work which is now in hand I apologize in advance. Is hallo bin uy to op l e a s e ( p a r t i c u l a r l y i f the work is being done in Cambridge).

THE PERFORMANCE OF GOVERNMENT

First, how well over the years do governments do their job? We seem on the whole to be disinclined to look back and evaluate how successful governments have been or how well their policies have worked. We have now had some 60 years of peace and prosperity since World War I, give or take the odd war under Mr Blair. Some of that will have been due to the actions and policies of governments, but how much? If you look back now, what were the things which governments did that changed the country for good or ill?
What has government been good at over the years? and what were the things which were the subject of much trumpeting at the time but which in the long run made not the blindest bit of difference to our lives? What were the government decisions, little noticed at the time, which have had major effects on our lives? Mrs Thatcher would have said that immigration policy in the 1950s and 1960s was one. Have we suffered or benefited from the discontinuities which occur when political powers win and lose power?

Let us pause on that word: discontinuities. It has often seemed to me, working for them, that successive governments of different political parties have more in common with each other than they like to admit. They compete ferociously to win power, but they also eye each other’s actions and policies greedily to see what works and what they can copy from each other to win and retain power. While most people fail to do more than make a passing judgement at an election, politicians themselves continuously make judgements about the successes and failures of their opponents and tacitly copy them where they can, even at the price of sacrificing their tribal values if this is needed for victory. Why else would Cameron abandon grammar schools or Blair and Brown clause 4?

THE 1965 NATIONAL PLAN

Let me begin with a demonstrable failure, the National Plan which was published by the Wilson government in September 1965. Presented to Parliament by the then First Secretary of State, George Brown, it covered all aspects of the economy for the five years ahead in astonishing detail. In the words of the Plan (National Plan 1965), it was:

- designed to achieve a 25 per cent increase in national output between 1964 and 1970.
- This objective ...involves achieving a 4 per cent annual growth rate of output well before 1970 and an annual average of 3.8 per cent between 1964 and 1970.

The Plan broke down these macro-objectives into detailed plans for every industry. To take a random example, if you look at table 1 in chapter 1.3.3, you will see that the output of chocolate and sugar confectionery was planned to rise from 688,000 tonnes in 1964 to 715,000 tonnes in 1970, with employment in the industry dropping from 86,000 to 82,000, two part-time workers counting as one. Implementation was to be in the hands of ‘a tripartite structure involving the CBI, the TUC and the Government’. There was a formidable checklist of action required: for example, ‘There will be a major development of 14 ports... Action: Government; Port Authorities’ (National Plan 1965, p. 17). A whole new government department was created to drive forward the Plan, the Department of Economic Affairs (DEA); and the government machine was instructed by the Wilson government, re-elected in 1966 on the strength of the Plan, to put its weight behind it. One of my first tasks as an Assistant Principal in the Board of Trade in 1966 was to draft a few plausible words about how well things were going in the area where I worked, namely the Kennedy Round (Sixth Session of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade 1964).

Whereas for a long time nationalization was accepted by the Conservative party because of its popularity, and even Mrs Thatcher flinched from privatizing the NHS, nobody has ever wanted to imitate the National Plan or even to talk about it. It was nonetheless an extraordinary episode, rich in insights into the workings of our institutions of government. If the approach failed – and it did – why exactly did it fail? What can we learn from it? Was it defeated by the Civil Service? The Treasury for sure, with a steely determination, wanted to destroy the DEA. Was it in any way successful: were there industries which grew on the strength of this purposeful plan? How far did the correct procedures of the...
Cabinet system operate and, if so, how was it that so many great men did not spot a disaster? What were its origins? Is there anyone going around now with a tape recorder gathering the oral recollections of those involved and, if not, why not?

REACTION AGAINST THE NATIONAL PLAN

Reaction against the National Plan and the failures of economic policy which it represented led to the conference at Selsdon Park in January 1970. It was at this conference that the embryo Heath government publicly set out their new political thinking about the role of the market and of the state and for the first time began, for instance, to think the unthinkable, privatization. The conference had been preceded by a lot of private debate in the Party, most notably at a conference at Sundridge Park in September 1969 at which Iain Macleod the Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer and Edward Heath had agreed on how they would approach the management of the economy but how (noted a private source) they needed to be sensitive to the potential for political unrest, most notably the risk of national strikes if they were too outspoken about privatization. That thinking has evolved and developed with many twists and turns but it has been fundamental in British politics over the last 30 years, including those of the new Labour governments of the 13 to 2010. But the process has been cautious. The 1979 manifesto did not actually refer to privatization; and some elements, such as vouchers for education, are still talked about with trepidation.

The path towards adoption of the Selsdon manifesto was not smooth. The U-turn of the Heath government is by now a familiar story. In the teeth of high inflation and mounting unemployment, the Heath government abandoned their plans and reverted to the safer nostrums of the Wilson era, with talks at the National Exonomic Development Council (NEDC) which had overseen the National Plan. (As a private secretary, I was required by Number 10 in April 1971 to ring up Nicholas Ridley, my Minister, and tell him that he had to amend a speech in which he planned to set out and argue for those policies. ‘But Richard, I am only repeating the words of our manifesto’, he said, and he was right; but force majeure prevailed.) Subsequently, the Thatcher government returned to these policies and developed them in their reforms of the 1980s which in turn were hugely influential on the young generation of New Labour politicians. Peter Mandelson as First Secretary, far from promulgating a National Plan, told the Google Zeitgeist Conference on 18 May 2009 (http://www.gov ernment-news.co.uk/.../berr-lord-mandelsons-speech-to-google-zeitgeist-conference-18th-may-grove-hotel-hertfordshire.asp):

The classic metaphor for the State’s relationship to the market has always been that of the umpire: policing the rules but leaving players to stand and fall on their strengths and weaknesses. Even post-credit crunch, I still think that’s right as far as it goes.

People in the old Board of Trade of the 1950s and early 1960s would have nodded their heads in approval. This chronicle of the slow reform of economic thinking across the parties deserves proper academic research.

POLICY TOWARDS LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Policy towards local government is another area where, I would argue, governments imitate each other. Some good academic research on this exists, in particular the excellent analysis of the poll tax published in 1994 by David Butler, Andrew Adonis and Tony Travers in their book Failure in British Government: The Politics of the Poll Tax (Butler et al. 1994).
On the face of it, those who developed the poll tax at least attempted to follow the precepts of good policy-making. The tax was the product of the best civil service expertise on local government finance. It had the attention of the best political brains in government at the time, not least Mrs Thatcher, Mr Ridley and Mr Waldegrave. It was included in a Green Paper, and in a manifesto on which the government was elected. And it was considered carefully in a Cabinet Committee (of which I was Secretary) before being introduced in Parliament. And yet it brought down the Prime Minister, and has entered the hall of fame as a disastrous government policy. What can we learn from that?

At one level it can be explained by William Waldegrave’s comment: ‘In the end there is no magic wand which can ensure that human decision-takers avoid mistakes’ (speech to the Social Market Foundation 1993). But the implications go deeper than simple human error. In a compelling Conclusion, the authors of the book identified ‘elective dictatorship’ as the fundamental weakness which ‘stared out’ from the episode in two ways (Butler et al., 1994). One weakness was the absence of checks and balances faced by a government with a secure hold on the Commons. In the words of the authors, Parliament was a rubber stamp.

The second weakness which the study identified was the freedom of a government with a subservient Parliament to rewrite the constitution at will. The authors point out that the Thatcher government embarked on radical constitutional reform in its post-1987 local government legislation which included not only the poll tax but also the abolition of the non-domestic rate, universal capping, compulsory competitive tendering, and a steady erosion of the role of local education authorities. They argue that this had profound constitutional implications. Local government, which should have been one of the foremost constitutional checks and balances and a prime organ of democratic self-government in its own right, was seen to be endlessly chopped and changed by central government.

That study was published in 1994. Subsequent events have borne out both weaknesses. If Parliament was a rubber stamp in 1994, how much more true has it been since then? The Blair Government in its first Parliament was as powerful, I would argue, as any government in living memory. The two dominant Ministers, Blair and Brown, controlled Parliament: their backbenchers, many of them new to Parliament, were wholly trusting and supportive. The Opposition were consumed by the experience of defeat and unable to oppose. Public opinion was continuously approving of government to a degree which, since polling began, was unprecedented. The economy was in a benign phase. The Unions and the Labour Party were quiescent. The checks and balances simply did not operate. In such circumstances the way was clear for the Executive to dictate whatever it wished to the Legislature.

And the position of local government has weakened further. New Labour, to quote their 1997 manifesto, came to power with a commitment to ‘More independent but accountable local government’ and, to quote their 2001 manifesto, ‘Reformed local government with higher-quality services, as we decentralize power’. Peter Mandelson recognized the case for these policies in 1996:

It is hard to believe, but sobering for Labour to recollect, that the Tories came to power on a firm pledge of freeing local government from constraints...Labour must act to reinvigorate local government...The task is not simply to reverse quangoisation: it is to promote local democracy and the civil values and civic pride that go along with the
best of it. Labour understands that the best thing about local government is that it *is* local. (Mandelson, in Mandelson and Liddle 1996, Ch. 8)

This of course is the opposite of what actually happened. Under both Conservative and New Labour political parties, the language has pointed one way, the actions have pointed another. Local government has been reduced in the words of Charles Clarke, in a speech to the National Social Services Conference in 2004, to a position where its role is in effect that of ‘active agents for central government’.

My point is not about the role of local government as such: that can be debated. But my point is that an academic study of the poll tax saga in 1994 put its finger with great accuracy on the weaknesses of our constitutional checks and balances which it described as ‘an undoubted cancer’; and it drew attention to something which we can see is even more of a problem today. It is a subject ripe for further academic review.

CONDUCT OF BUSINESS

Governments also imitate each other in the way that they conduct their business internally, even though, again, they may not wish to acknowledge the influence. Mr Heath for instance introduced the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS) as a way of challenging the thinking of departments. Mrs Thatcher rather publicly disbanded the CPRS, but set up in Number 10 her own Policy Unit which performed a similar but extended function for her. And of course Mr Blair multiplied these units to increase the power of his ‘strong centre’. The degree to which he was influenced by what was perceived to be Mrs Thatcher’s successful practices was acknowledged by Peter Mandelson in 1996:

> To get Ministers to act as an integral part of the government and not simply as heads of sections within it, Blair should emulate some of Mrs Thatcher’s practices – while behaving differently in other respects. Mrs Thatcher conducted a lot of government business through bilateral meetings with Ministers and through ad hoc, relatively informal, ministerial groups meeting under her leadership to agree policies and resolve differences . . . . Bilateral and ad hoc meetings, serviced by No. 10 staff, are a good idea. (Mandelson 1996, Ch. 10)

The truth is that Mrs Thatcher was a great deal more punctilious about observing the form of Cabinet Government than this implies and would not have dared to introduce ‘sofa government’ on the scale adopted by Blair. But it illustrates the degree to which governments implicitly study, adopt and develop each other’s practices, quietly and almost under the counter.

As with local government, the point may well have continuing significance. If Mr Cameron was as impressed by Mr Blair and his style of government as he was reported to be by Andrew Rawnsley in an article entitled ‘Oh No. Not another one who wants to be in the West Wing’ (Rawnsley 2009), the process of emulation might continue, with whatever consequences for Cabinet government and professional news management that may entail. On the other hand, Coalition Government may exert its own disciplines. Here again the case for academic scrutiny of the internal management of government business is powerful. The continuity of approach to management reforms in the Civil Service is another area, going back to the Fulton Report of 1967, where successive governments have built on each other’s inheritance.
FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

Finally, there is the whole area of how governments try to deal with the unknown: what Harold Macmillan famously called ‘events, dear boy, events’ when asked by a journalist what was most likely to blow governments off course. All governments are at risk of being diverted for long periods from their priorities and plans by sudden, unexpected developments which require the full urgent attention of their leaders. A restless desire to spot trouble coming – ‘horizon-scanning’ in the current jargon – crops up over and again in government.

Horizon-scanning, though it will almost inevitably fail to spot the real surprise, is an essential activity of government, whichever political party is in power. The effort must be made. As a function it has gone through many twists and turns and in the 1990s it was downgraded when it was transferred to the Home Office. I reconstituted a new Civil Contingencies Secretariat in June 2001 with three chief roles, in the words of the Number 10 spokesman:

First, it would have a ‘look ahead’ function, looking at what issues were coming on the horizon which we might need to address. Second, it would work with Departments to ensure they had robust systems for dealing with problems. Third, it would have an operational role when events occurred.

Horizon-scanning on economic issues is peculiarly difficult under any government. I was one of the team assembled as part of JIC (B) in the Cabinet Office in 1971 to 1973 to try to analyse intelligence about economic events around the world. Although we had some minor successes – on the failure of the rice harvest in Vietnam, I remember, and a forward look on the Japanese economy – we were frustrated by two things. One was the dislike by HM Treasury of anything which threatened their territory; and the other was the taboo on any study which looked at ourselves or our allies. I am not particularly surprised that no one foresaw the credit crunch even when it was under their nose.

Horizon-scanning is intrinsically difficult on any subject, economic or otherwise, regardless of the politics of the government. We tend to look at the future as a linear extrapolation of our recent past. So when in 1973 the Assessment Staff attempted to forecast what the world would be like in 1990 we foresaw that terrorism would be a problem but we saw it mainly in terms of hijacking of aircraft on an increased scale because that was uppermost in our minds after Leila Khalid carried out the first hijackings of a plane in 1969 and 1970. But in reality the main shocks are disjunctures with the recent past, events which are not in a straight line but which create a discontinuity, as with the oil price rise in 1974, or the character of terrorist acts on 9/11, or the fuel protests in 2001 which defied all previous assessments of the speed at which an interruption in fuel supplies would act on the economy.

I come back to my starting point. Government – its institutions, its working, its constitutional controls – is hugely important, not just as a subject of gossip or history in the making but as a discipline which embraces many different aspects of public life. There are many important things that governments do, and many important ways in which they behave, which, to our general detriment, go unstudied. I believe that it is an essential part of any university’s research and of the education which it provides to its students to contribute to our understanding of how our institutions of government work. The Whitehall Programme under Rod Rhodes showed what can be done. It’s up to every university to follow the trail which he and his project teams blazed.
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