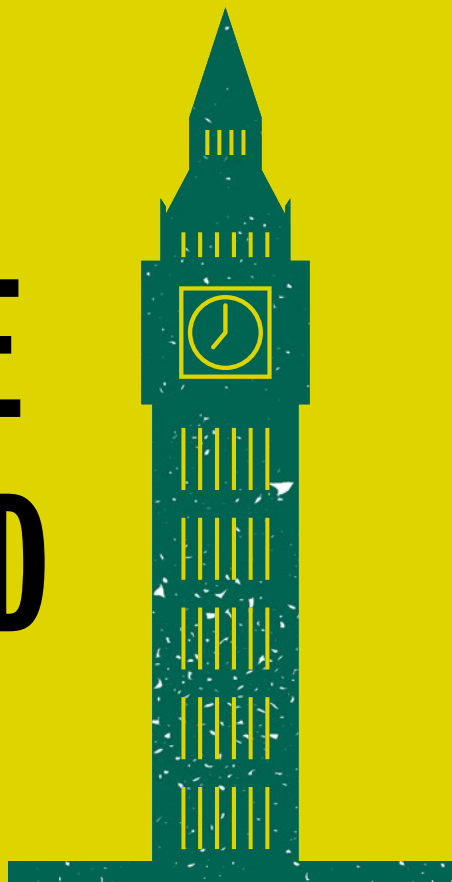


**THE  
END  
OF**



**WHITEHALL?**

**GOVERNMENT BY PERMANENT CAMPAIGN**

**PALGRAVE POLICY ESSENTIALS**

**Patrick Diamond**



# The End of Whitehall?

Patrick Diamond

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Government by Permanent Campaign

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*There is nothing a politician likes so little as to be well informed; it makes  
decision-making so complex and difficult.*

John Maynard Keynes

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

## INTRODUCTION

This book's purpose is to analyse the most significant changes that have taken place in the Whitehall model since the Conservative-led Government's formation in 2010.<sup>1</sup> The developments of recent years originate in previous initiatives, particularly the novel ideas for reforming the state initiated by the Thatcher and Blair administrations. The core argument is the traditional Whitehall paradigm is being replaced by the 'New Political Governance' (NPG), an alternative model centred on political campaigning, ministerial advisers, personalised appointments, and a 'promiscuously partisan' governing machinery (Aucoin 2012). The civil service has gone beyond a 'tipping-point' or 'critical juncture'. The nature of the state bureaucracy in Britain is being altered fundamentally.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The arguments in this monograph draw on my recently published research paper in *Public Policy and Administration*: 'The Westminster System under the Cameron coalition: 'Promiscuous partisanship' or institutional resilience?' 7th November 2017.

<sup>2</sup>Throughout I refer to the *British* state bureaucracy well aware that since the advent of devolution in the late 1990s, there are separate civil service functions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The book is focused on the UK-wide administrative tradition predominantly concentrated in Whitehall.

## NEW POLITICAL GOVERNANCE AND THE END OF WHITEHALL?

The concept of NPG is derived from the work of the Canadian public administration scholar, Peter C. Aucoin. He foresaw a paradigmatic shift in governance and public management in the Anglophone states.<sup>3</sup> Their bureaucracies are experiencing growing conflict and discord: in this environment, ‘the propensity for perceptions of politicisation to grow becomes almost unavoidable’ (Grube 2015: 318). On the one hand, civil servants feel vulnerable to attack. Their influence and privileges are diminished by politicians unperturbed when officials become the target of vilification. The former Cabinet Secretary, Lord Butler, complained of, ‘an unprecedented spate of recrimination against named civil servants, made worse by the fact that much of it has been through unattributable, backstairs briefings’.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, Ministers are increasingly frustrated at the incompetence and ‘accountability deficit’ that allegedly characterises civil service performance. After merely a year as Prime Minister, David Cameron was, ‘fighting something approaching an attritional civil war with what his advisers call ‘the machine’.<sup>5</sup> The appetite for reform of the Whitehall machinery on the part of the political class grew stronger.

It was not always this way. In previous generations, British government was perceived to be both democratic and competent, uniquely combining qualities of ‘efficiency’ with ‘effectiveness’, the envy of politicians everywhere (King and Crewe 2013: xi). The first post-war Prime Minister, Clement Attlee (1956: 124), boasted the British civil service was, ‘unequaled in all the world’. Yet over the last thirty years, the reputation of Britain’s public administration has become increasingly tarnished (King and Crewe 2013: xi).

This introductory chapter outlines the book’s conceptual framework, clarifies the intellectual terrain, and then maps the period in which the traditional civil service model has allegedly been eclipsed. The chapter begins by considering the institutional roots of the Whitehall ‘paradigm’. The chapter then turns to the recent history of Whitehall reform through to the Conservative governments of David Cameron and Theresa May. Finally, the chapter considers the remorseless rise of NPG as the autonomy and independence of Whitehall’s bureaucrats has been assailed.

<sup>3</sup> Aucoin was referring to the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

<sup>4</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201314/ldhansrd/text/140116-0001.htm> Accessed 6th February 2018.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.economist.com/blogs/blightly/2011/03/david\\_cameron\\_versus\\_civil\\_service](https://www.economist.com/blogs/blightly/2011/03/david_cameron_versus_civil_service) Accessed 12th December 2017.



The argument throughout is the Whitehall model is being radically reshaped. The state bureaucracy in Britain is subject to ‘permanent revolution’. Two key claims animate *The End of Whitehall*. The first is the Whitehall ‘paradigm’ is being eroded to the point where it is scarcely recognisable. Secondly, the destruction of the British tradition of public administration is detrimental. In Weber’s terms, ‘politics’ is being allowed to encroach upon and weaken the values of ‘administration’. Increasingly, partisanship prevails over the pursuit of the public interest. The ‘deliberative space’ for policy-making has been denuded at the expense of good government and the public service ethos.

The heyday of the Whitehall model in the decades after the Second World War is perceived to have been a ‘golden era’ for British government. In many ways, it was far from ‘golden’. Professional bureaucrats saw citizens as passive subjects of the Crown. The gentleman in Whitehall apparently ‘knew best’. Conceiving policy change as pulling the levers of the centralised state stymied the progress of economic and social reform. Yet the challenge to the Whitehall paradigm over the last thirty years scarcely gives grounds for confidence. Fundamental constitutional principles have been breached. The climate of ‘hyper-innovation’ led to waves of confusing managerial reforms. As a consequence, the UK state is more exposed than ever to the danger of egregious ‘policy blunders’.

### THE WHITEHALL MODEL

The Whitehall ‘paradigm’ is a structure of governance that emphasises the virtues of non-partisanship, neutrality, parliamentary accountability, bureaucratic permanence, and most importantly, mutual trust between politicians and civil servants (Page 2010). The ‘model’ was elaborated by Colin Campbell and Graham Wilson in their seminal book, *The End of Whitehall: Death of a Paradigm?* (1995). The Northcote-Trevelyan reforms of 1854 and the Haldane report published in the aftermath of the First World War decreed that Ministers and officials were mutually dependent. Politicians relied on civil servants to provide objective advice and uphold constitutional propriety; officials depended on Ministers to safeguard anonymity and protect the privileges of bureaucrats, maintaining the ‘monopoly’ of the civil service over policy advice. According to the Armstrong Memorandum, ‘The Civil Service as such has no constitutional personality or responsibility separate from the duly constituted government of the day’.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>[http://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/1996\\_Armstrong\\_Memorandum.pdf](http://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/1996_Armstrong_Memorandum.pdf) Accessed 6th February 2018.

The Whitehall model is a rational ‘Weberian’ bureaucracy. Politicians and administrators rely on one another but are ‘distinctly separated’, performing contrasting roles inside government institutions; officials are, ‘bound by [their] obedience to the power-holder’, while politicians are confident civil servants will protect them in the struggle for power (Weber 2015: 156; Savoie 2008). As Campbell and Wilson (1995: 9) attest, ‘To understand British executive politics, one needs to understand the world of the politician, the world of the bureaucrat, and the interaction between the two’.

In Weber’s ideal-type bureaucracy, civil servants carry out the instructions of Ministers but as administrators—a separate breed from politicians: ‘The honour of the civil servant is vested in his ability to execute conscientiously the order of superior authorities, exactly as if the orders agreed with his own conviction’ (Weber 2014: 19). The Whitehall administrative tradition is thus characterised by a ‘loyalty paradox’. Officials loyally serve the government of the day, but *not* the partisan interests of the governing party (O’Malley 2017: 404). The Whitehall model is part of the European ‘Rechtsstaat’ tradition of a non-political civil service faithfully serving Ministers (Guy-Peters et al. 2005: 1292). According to Lord Vanistart, former Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister (cited in Hennessy 1989: 483): ‘The soul of our service is the loyalty with which we execute ordained error’.

The mutually respectful relationship between politicians and civil servants was the ‘governing marriage’ that shaped the British state in the aftermath of the Second World War.<sup>7</sup> The ‘golden age’ of the British post-war consensus rested on harmony between politicians and bureaucrats, unified by confidence in the state’s capacity to transform the economy and society.<sup>8</sup> ‘Individual greed’ and the doctrine of the limited state were replaced by the ‘collective good’ manifested in the welfare state capitalism forged by Keynes and Beveridge (Hennessy 1992: 44). Faith in the institutions of government was almost absolute. The Whitehall model was tied inextricably to the notion of ‘club government’; public administration was the preserve of the closed, largely male elite inhabiting the ‘Whitehall village’ (Marquand 1988; Moran 2003; Bruce-Gardyne 1986). As the former Cabinet Secretary, Lord Butler, reflected, ‘there was a greater feeling

<sup>7</sup><https://www.civilserviceworld.com/profile-peter-hennessy> Accessed 15th December 2017.

<sup>8</sup>It is worth noting that a number of civil servants who were employed in the Attlee Government in 1945 such as Hugh Gaitskell, Douglas Jay and Harold Wilson subsequently became elected Members of Parliament and Government Ministers.

of solidarity and companionship between Ministers and civil servants'.<sup>9</sup> Even the 'outsiders' penetrating Whitehall were part of the club. The policy-making procedures of the state were dominated by a narrow 'epistemic community' who held shared assumptions about the responsibilities of government. Keynes' biographer, Robert Skidelsky charts, 'the increasing absorption of academics into government service' over the course of the twentieth century:

The growing use of experts in government...reflected the greater complexity of governing in an urban, industrial society. The First World War opened up government to university academics...[who] never ceased to see themselves as an extended arm of the state. (Skidelsky 2013: 264)

The experts who served the machine came from the elite universities of Oxford, Cambridge and the London School of Economics (LSE), founded by Beatrice and Sidney Webb to fuse social science with Fabian socialism. By the mid-twentieth century, those who operated in the bureaucracy predominantly had shared educational backgrounds, reinforcing the bonds of reciprocal loyalty and trust.<sup>10</sup> Their world-views were complementary. The British state was saturated with 'Whig Imperialist' and 'Democratic Collectivist' assumptions; Burkean gradualism was combined with new-found faith in Fabian technocracy (Marquand 2008).

The British system of government was believed to be highly adaptive, evolving to embrace new challenges. 'Historical institutionalism', a core theoretical framework in political science, maintains that organisations make incremental adjustments over time accommodating both 'internal' and 'external' pressures; where change occurs, it is consistent with past choices and institutional legacies (Pierson 2004; Van den Berg 2016). Much of the academic literature maintains that reform in Whitehall fits within a pattern of gradual movement rather than a disruptive break with the past (Lowe 2011; Halligan 2010; Page 2010; Burnham and Pyper 2008; Bovaird and Russell 2007; Horton 2006).

Civil servants are inclined by temperament to downplay upheaval. Reforms are believed to be consistent with the traditional virtues of the British system. Politicians create confusion by overhauling public administration but pragmatic civil servants have an unrivalled capacity to 'muddle

<sup>9</sup><https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/the-civil-service-and-the-constitution>  
Accessed 19th December 2017.

<sup>10</sup>R. Skidelsky <http://www.skidelskyr.com/site/article/the-british-tradition-of-administration/> Accessed 4 December 2017.