

The birth, life and genetics of the British Civil Service Commission - A narrative¹

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Opsomming: Die geboorte, lewe en genetiese van die Britse Staatsdienskommissie - 'n narratief

Die Britse Staatsdienskommissie is vir alle praktiese doeleindes in 1991 ontbind en met twee ander instellings vervang. Ten spyte daarvan, bestaan staatsdienskommissies nog steeds in talle Britse Statebondslande. In sommige van dié state is daar selfs grondwetlik vir die bestaan van so 'n instelling voorsiening gemaak. Dit wil dus voorkom asof die ontstaan en bestaan van 'n staatsdienskommissie in Brittanje, 'n invloed moes uitgeoefen het op state wat deel was van die Britse invloedssfeer. Dit het tot die vraag gelei: Wat was die vernaamste kenmerke van die Britse Staatsdienskommissie in sy bestaan van meer as 140 jaar? Hierdie artikel is 'n narratief. Dit vertel die verhaal van die geboorte en lewe van die Britse Staatsdienskommissie ten einde daardie 'genetiese' kenmerke (onafhanklikheid, keuring, meriete en unifikasie) te identifiseer wat oor die jare, van geslag tot geslag, dieselfde gebly het. Dit dien as grondslag

vir verdere (vergeelykende) navorsing om die invloed van die Britse staatsdiens op dié van statebondslande te bepaal.

Introduction

Although the Civil Service Commission in Britain was disbanded for all practical purposes in 1991, its heritage is still going strong in various commonwealth countries. A recent publication by the Commonwealth Secretariat (Polidano & Manning 1996) leaves no doubt about the presence of public service commissions in various Commonwealth countries. Analysis of the constitutions of commonwealth countries such as India, Nigeria, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa, all relatively new constitutions, in fact shows that they make provision for public service commissions (Wessels 1996:99). So public service commissions do exist at the end of this millennium and are apparently quite alive and well.

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the narrative of the birth and life of the British Civil Service Commission in order to identify those characteristics that possibly could have been genetically transmitted to the public services of the former British colonies and dominions.

Narratives consist of three main parts: the introduction, the actual chain of events, and the ending. The narrative of the British Civil Service Commission is no exception. The birth of the British Civil Service Commission can be traced back to February 1854 when a report on the 'Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service' by Charles Trevelyan and Stafford Northcote was presented to Parliament. The Civil Service Commission in Britain was no accident. It was a planned pregnancy!

A planned pregnancy

What was the reason for the conception of the idea of a Civil Service Commission? Why was this pregnancy planned?

Northcote and Trevelyan (Reader 1981:78) described their observations as follows:

It may be noticed in particular that the comparative lightness of the work, and the certainty of provision in case of retirement owing to bodily incapacity, furnish strong inducements to the parents and friends of sickly youths to endeavour to obtain for them employment in the service of the Government...

The result naturally is, that the public service suffers both in internal efficiency and in public estimation. The character of the individuals influences the mass, and it is thus that we often hear complaints of official delays, official evasions of difficulty, and official indisposition to improvement.

Easy work for the sons of family and friends led to poor service to the taxpaying public. But how did it happen? The two gentlemen observed further:

The character of the young men admitted to the public service depends chiefly upon the discretion with which the heads of departments, and others who are entrusted with the distribution of patronage, exercise that privilege. In those cases in which the patronage of departments belongs to their chief for the time being, the appointments which it commonly falls to his lot to make are ... those of junior clerks, to whom no very important duties are in the first instance to be assigned ... (A)s the character and abilities of the new junior clerk will produce but little immediate effect upon the office, the chief of the department is naturally led to regard the selection as a matter of small moment, and will probably bestow the office upon the son or dependant of someone having personal or political claims upon him, or perhaps upon the son of some meritorious public servant, without instituting any very minute inquiry into the merits of the young man himself (Reader 1981:79).

The heads of departments who often appointed incapable young men at the entry level to their departments were usually retired long before the inability of their own appointees began to harm the efficiency of their departments. It is evident from the Northcote-Trevelyan Report that a closed career system was followed in the departments of the British public service – in other words, there was primarily one way of entering the civil service, and that was in the lower grades at the bottom of the hierarchy: the so-called entrance level.

Once appointed at entry level, the appointees' success 'depends upon their simply avoiding any flagrant misconduct, and attending with moderate regularity to routine duties' (Reader 1981:78). In fact, after 'a young man has been once appointed, the public have him for life; and if he is idle or inefficient, provided he does not grossly misconduct himself, we must either submit to have a portion of the public business inefficiently and discredibly performed, or must place the incompetent person on the retired list, with a pension for the rest of his life' (Reader 1981:78-79).

To summarise: the reason or need for such an institution was created by, as Richard Chapman (1995:11) describes it, 'corruption and partisan political influence in the executive operation of government'. Corruption and partisan political influence specifically in the appointment of new entrants into the Civil Service seem to be the main reasons for Charles Trevelyan and Stafford Northcote to recommend, *inter alia*, recruitment by open examination by an independent central board of examiners (Reader 1981:82) — the conception (not the birth, yet) of the Civil Service Commission in the United Kingdom of Great Britain.

We now have the backdrop to this exciting story, and we can start with the real chain of events: the body of the narrative.

The birth

Little more than a year after the Northcote-Trevelyan Report was presented to Parliament, the first Civil Service Commission was appointed by Order in Council for 'conducting the Examination of the young Men so proposed to be appointed to any of the Junior Situations in the Civil Establishment' (The Order in Council of 21 May 1855). The Commission's independence, as recommended in the Report, was secured not only by the way in which commissioners were appointed, but also by their term of office. According to the Order in Council they 'shall hold their Offices during the Pleasure of Her Majesty'. The Civil Service Commission subsequently prided itself on this independence from the rest of Whitehall (Drewry & Butcher 1988:100). At last: the birth of the main character in this narrative: the Civil Service Commission of the United Kingdom of Britain.

We should note that the only reason for this commission's existence was one of selection, namely to conduct the examination of young men to be appointed at the entry level of the Civil Service and to provide the successful candidates with a 'Certificate of Qualification for such Situation' (Order in Council of 21 May 1855). As the commissioners' assignment covered the entire Civil Service, and not one department, it can be regarded as the first step in treating the British Civil Service as a unit. Although the Northcote-Trevelyan Report also made recommendations regarding promotion on merit, the unification of the service and the separation of intellectual work to be performed by graduates and mechanical work to be allocated to those of lesser ability (Greenwood & Wilson 1984:89-90), these aspects did not become part of the duties of the first Civil Service Commission as appointed by the Order in Council of 21 May 1855.

This child, named the 'Civil Service Commission', was born to be an independent selector of new entrants into the British Civil Service.

Coming of age

In analysing the life story of the British Civil Service Commission, it becomes clear that its task was not always easy, especially at the beginning. However, its position was reinforced by the Superannuation Act of 1859, which determined that all civil servants must have a certificate from the Commission to qualify for a pension (Drewry & Butcher 1988:44). Still, ministerial nomination remained more or less the norm until an Order in Council in June 1870 provided that virtually all clerks seeking entry into the civil service required a certificate of fitness from the Civil Service Commission (Drewry & Butcher 1988:45). A system of competitive examination, administered by the Civil Service Commission, with only limited exceptions, became compulsory for all departments. Indeed, it took almost 15 years for the Civil

Service Commission to come of age and to get the power and legitimacy to do what Northcote and Trevelyan had envisaged.

Adulthood

The Commission nevertheless did not have unbridled power. In fact, Treasury Ministers were answerable to Parliament for the Commission's work, and Treasury's approval was necessary for the regulations in which the Commission prescribed the qualifications required of candidates and the methods by which the competitions were to be conducted (Drewry & Butcher 1988:39). Thus, the independence of the Civil Service Commission did have its limitations – a case of checks and balances. I could find no evidence of Treasury deliberately obstructing the Civil Service Commission in its effort to prevent corruption and partisan political influence in the selection and appointment of new entrants into the Civil Service.

The Civil Service Commission and Treasury both played an important rôle in the unification of the British Civil Service. It seems that most of Northcote and Trevelyan's other recommendations, for example the unification of the service, promotion on merit and the division between intellectual work and mechanical work, were entrusted to the Treasury.

The leading role of Treasury in the civil service became more evident when Sir Warren Fisher, Permanent Secretary of the Treasury, was appointed as Permanent Head of the Civil Service in September 1919. One of his tasks was to advise the Prime Minister on civil service appointments – specifically in the higher echelons. This was followed in 1920 by an Order in Council which determined that Treasury 'may make regulations for controlling the conduct of His Majesty's Civil Establishments, and providing for the classification, remuneration, and other conditions of service of all persons employed therein, whether permanently or temporary' (Drewry & Butcher 1988:41).

Did Treasury trespass on the territory of the Civil Service Commission? If one reads the Order in Council of 21 May 1855 again, it seems that the functions of the Civil Service Commission were well described and that these new tasks of Treasury were not intended to limit the Commission's function. The designation of Sir Warren Fisher as Permanent Head of the Civil Service in 1919 (Drewry & Butcher 1988:41) can be seen as the birth of a second child in this narrative, namely the *central personnel authority* for the unified civil service.

Nearly forty years later it became necessary to change the arrangements in the household of Treasury, single parent of the central personnel authority. As many modern families will do in similar situations, the advice of a counsellor (in this case the Plowden Committee on Control of Public Expenditure) was sought. The Plowden Committee advised in its report of 1961 that the Treasury be divided into two divisions, namely the Finance and Economic Group and the Pay and Management

Group. The implementation of that advice in 1962 not only introduced a new name for the central personnel authority, but also signalled a growing independent identity. At that stage, this new identity did not seem to be a threat to the Civil Service Commission.

Marriage with the central personnel agency

The first real threat to the independence of the Civil Service Commission came with a forced marriage to the central personnel authority, namely the Pay and Management Group of the Treasury. This forced marriage resulted from the well-known Fulton Report in 1968, which recommended that the Pay and Management Group, together with the Civil Service Commission, form an independent part of the newly created Civil Service Department (CSD) under direct control of the Prime Minister (Greenwood & Wilson 1984:96). The arrangements of this marriage gave the new couple (the Civil Service Department) the responsibility for civil service pay and management, administrative and managerial efficiency, as well as the recruitment functions of the Civil Service Commission (Greenwood & Wilson 1984:96). According to the authors Greenwood and Wilson (1984:96), the Civil Service Commission formed an independent unit within the newly created department. Is this not perhaps a case of letting the newly wed and wealthy bride believe that she retains her independence after the marriage?

Ageing

The marriage did not last very long and was disbanded in 1981. Treasury regained the responsibility for manpower, pay, allowances and pensions (Greenwood & Wilson 1984:97). A new unit within the Cabinet Office, namely the Management and Personnel Office, absorbed the Civil Service Department's other functions such as personnel management, recruitment and training (Greenwood & Wilson 1984:98). The Civil Service Commission was attached to the MPO but with diminishing powers and responsibilities. One can say that the Civil Service Commission was placed in a retirement village. She remained in charge of her own home and garden, but everything was very small compared with the mansion and estate to which she had been accustomed.

The Civil Service Commission's diminished responsibilities and powers are evidenced by the fact that on 1 January 1983 the day-to-day responsibilities for the recruitment of grades up to Clerical Officer and equivalent were transferred from the Civil Service Commission to departments, subject to central prescription and guidance. Individual departments believed that they were more capable to recruit per-

sonnel (specifically senior personnel) for their own unique needs, and that this could be done more cheaply and quickly than by the Civil Service Commission. However, in spite of disapproval from the departments, a report by the Management and Personnel Office to the Prime Minister recommended that the Civil Service Commission retain the central recruitment of direct entrant Executive Officers for the whole civil service (MPO 1983:9-12).

From old age home to the graveyard

A few years later, the Civil Service Commission passed away in the retirement village. Her estate was divided between her two offspring, the Office of the Civil Service Commissioners and the Recruitment and Assessment Service Agency.

The Civil Service Order in Council which came into force on 1 April 1991 practically disbanded the Civil Service Commission (Chapman 1991:6; 1995:11) and replaced it with a small office of the Civil Service Commissioners and a Recruitment and Assessment Services Agency (Chapman 1991:2; 1994:605). The Recruitment and Assessment Services Agency, a recruitment and assessment agency for departments and agencies, was accountable to the Minister of State, Privy Council Office (Chapman 1991:3). The Civil Service Commissioners remain accountable to the Queen (Chapman 1991:3) and are responsible for appointments at grade seven and above, and for fast-stream appointments (Farnham & Horton 1992:48).

Among the duties of the Civil Service Commissioners after 1991 was the obligation to monitor, and from 1995 onwards to audit, more than 3000 devolved units of recruitment (Chapman 1995:12). The auditors, independent consultants appointed by the Commissioners, concentrate on recruitment systems, and only if there seems to be a need for a spot check, will they reach down to individual competitions (Chapman 1995:12). Although the Civil Service Commissioners are still appointed by Her Majesty in Council, and although they are still steering the recruitment and selection process, their responsibilities seems very different from the duties of the first Civil Service Commission and its successors.

The genetics of the blueprint: unravelling the narrative's chain of events

At the turn of the 19th century Mendel described genes as 'units of heredity' that do not blend in the process of reproduction and thus become diluted, but are transmitted from generation to generation without changing their identity (Capra 1982:107).

By looking at the history of the British Civil Service Commission over nearly 150 years, one tends to ask: What were the main characteristics of the initial Civil Service Commission that were genetically transmitted from generation to generation without changing their identity?

The Civil Service Commission in Britain was born in 1855 as an independent institution to bring an end to corruption and partisan political influence in the appointment of new entrants into the civil service as a whole. Their means, as recommended by Charles Trevelyan and Stafford Northcote, was recruitment through open examination – in other words, recruitment on merit and not patronage.

We can identify at least four characteristics of the British Civil Service Commission.

The first is *independence*, for the members of the Commission were appointed by the monarch in council, and this has remained unchanged through the years.

The second characteristic is *selection*, for members were assigned to 'end ... the corruption and partisan political influence in the appointment of new' entrants. The task of the British Civil Service Commission was to select new entrants into the civil service – nothing less and nothing more. This characteristic changed over time as the focus of selection shifted (from physical examination of junior personnel to supervision of senior and fast-stream appointments). After the changes of 1991, the Civil Service Commissioners remain involved with selection – but only in auditing the selection processes of different departments and agencies.

The third characteristic is *merit* instead of patronage as criterion for selection (please note: promotion was excluded). That was the main reason for the entrance examinations or selection 'competitions'. It also seems to be the main reason for auditing since 1995 by the Civil Service Commissioners.

The fourth characteristic is *unification* and refers to the fact that the scope of the Commission's activities included the civil service as a whole. Perhaps this gene explains the rapid 'ageing' of the Civil Service Commission in the eighties and its sudden death in the early nineties. Although unification of the British Civil Service seemed to reach an all time high in the early eighties with the attachment of the CSC to the Cabinet Office, the proliferation of the civil service also started during those years with increasing numbers of 'next step agencies'. The growing emphasis on greater management autonomy for departments and agencies eliminated the need for compulsory central recruitment and appointments.

These four, the genes of independence, selection, merit and unification, characterised the British Civil Service Commission appointed in 1855 and formed the blueprint for its successors in Britain. To what extent have the genetics or characteristics of the British Civil Service Commission served as blueprint for public service commissions in the British dominions?

Conclusion

This British Civil Service Commission passed away in 1991 mainly because its unifying gene was incompatible with the new trends of management autonomy. Only one of the two offspring of the late Civil Service Commission adequately satisfies the genetic criteria of their predecessor. That one is the Office of the Civil Service Commissioners. Although the unifying gene is still present, it has mutated in such a way that it no longer threatens the management autonomy of departments. As did the late Civil Service Commission, they also are focussing on the recruitment and selection process, but in a different (light handed) way. The Commissioners are still appointed by Her Majesty in Council and in that retain their independence from the executive authority.

The narration in this article covered the birth and life of the British Civil Service Commission over a period of more than 140 years. From this narration, we identified four main genetic characteristics of the British Commission, namely independence, selection, merit and unification. A comparative study can determine whether these characteristics have been copied or adapted in the public service commissions of various former British colonies and dominions and present Commonwealth countries. The outcome of the ideas of Northcote and Trevelyan are evident today, not only in the British civil service, but probably also in various commonwealth countries.

Endnote

1 This article is based on research done by the same author for the paper *Civil service commissions in Britain and its dominions: common historical origin, different destinies*, read at the BISA/PSA Political Science Group's Workshop-Conference on *The Dominion Concept: Inter-state and Domestic Politics in the British Empire*, held from 21 to 25 July 1998 at the University of Warwick, England.

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