

BACK TO THE FUTURE: REDISCOVERING THE LOST ARTS OF THE VICTORIAN MANDARIN

Under the conventions of the Westminster system, civil service mandarins of the twentieth century were expected to be discrete, impartial and anonymous as they unobtrusively carried on the business of government. Times have changed. The pressures of modern governance and a 24/7 media cycle are pulling contemporary public service leaders further into the public limelight, leading to concerns that they may become politicised. This paper draws on an older civil service leadership tradition from the Victorian era, as embodied in the person of Charles Trevelyan, to argue that robust public engagement by mandarins need not lead to their politicisation.

Keywords: civil service; mandarins; public administration; public leadership; Trevelyan; Westminster

For much of the twentieth century, senior civil servants were neither seen nor heard. Quietly, tactfully and anonymously they wielded immense policy and administrative power in Whitehall whilst the public gaze remained on the politicians at Westminster (see Hennessy, 1989). Anonymity was coupled with impartiality as one of the core conventions for how public servants should conduct themselves. In the twenty-first century a renewed emphasis on transparency, accountability and policy implementation has seen modern mandarins emerge from anonymity to adopt a much more public face. Speeches, media interviews, social media posts and select committee appearances are an integral part of the job description of contemporary civil service leaders (see Rhodes, 2011). Whilst this change reflects the increasing complexity of modern governance and the influence of a 24/7 media cycle, it also in fact draws on a much older civil service leadership tradition.

The Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854 set out the foundations of a merit-based employment system, but it did not advocate for an ‘apolitical’ civil service that should operate in the shadows. Sir Stafford Northcote, Sir Charles Trevelyan and their contemporaries were in many ways policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon, 1984), men with strong political opinions who frequently sought to shape the administrative and policy worlds in very public ways. This paper re-examines the public leadership of Victorian mandarins through the lens of contemporary practice to analyse whether a ‘public’ role for mandarins inevitably leads to perceptions of politicisation that undermine the impartiality that is central to the workings of a Westminster system bureaucracy.

Mid-Victorian mandarins like Trevelyan were given a degree of license by their political masters to be vigorously involved in the policy process, including in public ways. As discussed below in the Trevelyan case study, this publicly-engaged style of administrative leadership could lead to intense criticism, but Trevelyan's fierce intellectual independence and determined non-partisanship insulated him against perceptions of politicisation, even when he was deeply engaged in very 'political' matters. Critics frequently attacked his ideas and his approach rather than making allegations that he had become inappropriately 'politicised'. This stands in contrast to contemporary mandarins in the twenty-first century who no longer enjoy the same degree of license to engage at the more controversial edges of public policy. Hence, when they speak in public, critics are quick to allege that they are doing so for 'political' reasons or that they have 'politicised' themselves by being overly supportive of the government of the day.

Whilst the central argument of the paper draws a comparison between the Victorian era and today, that analysis is framed against the backdrop of the more anonymous leadership styles of the mandarins of the twentieth century. Of course, this intervening period was also one of great complexity and nuance in the roles that senior civil servants were asked to play. In painting the period with broad strokes as an era of quiet but powerful mandarins, I am applying a generalisation that covers a myriad of differences in individual practice. Some figures during that time frequently also gave public speeches, or found themselves in the headlines through their official behaviour. For example, Sir William Armstrong, as Head of the Home Civil Service, became a key public figure during the period of the Heath Government in particular. Edward Bridges published a widely read lecture on the nature of the civil service in his 1950 *Portrait of a Profession*. Leaders such as Bridges (see Chapman, 1988), Warren Fisher, Percival Waterfield (see Chapman, 1984), Evelyn Sharp, Otto Clarke, Norman Brook, and Burke Trend were towering figures who wielded great power at the edges of the public consciousness, and did at times break through the surface following key decisions or appearances in front of parliamentary committees. An excellent composite biographical study of many of these figures by Theakston (1999) confirms that the natural discretion of mandarins often belied what was in reality a wide engagement with the world beyond Whitehall. So in framing this era as a time in which mandarins operated more in the shadows, it is an argument of degrees rather than absolutes in differentiating it from the contemporary period.

But those differences in degree are vital to explaining shifting patterns in civil service leadership. Figures like Norman Brook and Burke Trend were certainly not wilting violets who chose to be largely anonymous out of a lack of self-confidence. They were every bit as frank and fearless in their advice as Charles Trevelyan was in his, but they largely offered their analysis behind the privacy of closed doors. They flourished at a time of a 'consensual conservative approach to bureaucracy' (Greenaway, 1992), in which an elite mandarin was seen as being of a piece with the political class it served. Coinciding with a long period of majority governments from 1924-1974, there was a

general stability around the roles expected of senior civil servants. By maintaining a low public profile, mandarins insulated themselves from the public assessments of those who might have wished to critique their words as evidence of some kind of politicisation. Civil service leaders are meant to have strong views, and the confidence to take them up with their minister. The successful working of the 'Whitehall model' relies upon it. But attempting to do so whilst operating in a far more public limelight creates room for perceptions of politicisation to emerge as commentators and opposition MPs assess the words and behaviours of mandarins through the lens of their own partisan agendas.

This potential link between anonymity and impartiality creates a difficult balancing act for current senior civil servants who are exhorted to be more open and engaged with the community, only to be excoriated for alleged 'politicisation' if their remarks are seen as too pertinent. It was a problem recognised but not resolved in the 1960s by the Fulton report, which argued that the risks in reducing anonymity were outweighed by the benefits:

The argument of the preceding paragraphs has important implications for the traditional anonymity of civil servants. It is already being eroded by Parliament and to a more limited extent by the pressures of the press, radio and television; the process will continue and we see no reason to seek to reverse it...We do not under-estimate the risks involved in such a change. It is often difficult to explain without also appearing to argue; however impartially one presents the facts, there will always be those who think that the presentation is biased...We believe that this will have to be faced and that Ministers and M.P.s should take a tolerant view of the civil servant who inadvertently steps out of line. (Fulton, 1968, paras 283-4)

As discussed in section 3 below, contemporary evidence suggests that Ministers and MPs are not necessarily naturally predisposed to taking a 'tolerant view of the civil servant who inadvertently steps out of line' in every case.

In the sections that follow, I begin by examining the theory and practice of contemporary public service leadership, and in particular the ways in which modern mandarins contribute to public debates in the twenty-first century governance environment. Section two then focuses on the career and leadership attributes of Charles Trevelyan as a case study of civil service leadership in the mid-Victorian period. The final section then draws together contemporary debates with the challenges of the mid-Victorian era to argue that contemporary public service leaders are in fact drawing significantly on mid-Victorian styles of public leadership to meet the complex demands of modern governance. The significance of this reversion to an older style of 'public' leadership is that it demonstrates that more publicly entrepreneurial leadership styles can be accommodated within the Westminster system of government without

undermining core components such as ministerial responsibility and public service impartiality.

1. Contemporary Public Service Leadership

As the full impact of the changes associated with the New Public Management have washed through the work of public servants over the past three decades, scholars and practitioners alike have turned to leadership studies in order to search for the kind of attributes that are necessary for success in the complex modern governance environment. In fact, there has been something of a 'leadership turn' in public administration in the last decade (see Van Wart, 2013; Vandenabeele, 2014; Bao et al, 2013; Simmons, 2011; Leslie and Canwell, 2010; Tizard, 2012; Ritz et al, 2014; Althaus and Wanna 2008; Kavanagh and Richards 2003; Chapman and O'Toole, 2010; Rhodes, Wanna and Weller, 2008). The literature is rife with debate over what the best form of leadership is for the public sector. From Moore's conception of pursuing 'public value' (1995) to Kane and Patapan's call to focus on the value of 'prudence' (2006; see also 't Hart, 2014), leadership studies have re-energised debates over what unique attributes public leaders actually require.

Whichever leadership approach modern mandarins adopt, it will be a form of leadership that is inherently more 'public' in its focus than was the case for much of the twentieth century. Leadership through public outreach is now an entrenched part of the job for those at the top. To quote Peter Shergold, former Secretary of the Australian Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet: 'I spoke to hundreds of forums, public and private, during my five years as 'national head' of the APS' (2014, p. 92). When reaching out to multiple stakeholders in relevant policy networks, mandarins deliver public speeches that canvas future policy challenges and how governments could meet them (Grube, 2012). Similarly, when leaders appear before parliamentary committees in the UK, their evidence is now broadcast on television. It is by definition a 'public' act of leadership.

The public nature of contemporary public service leadership becomes most apparent when it involves politically contentious policy questions. It is here that accusations of 'politicisation' are most likely to emerge, as public service leaders are seen to have compromised their impartiality in some way. The line between appropriate 'responsiveness' by public servants and inappropriate 'politicisation' is a deeply contested one (see Mulgan, 2008). When it comes to the public behaviour of civil servants, what can be termed 'functional politicization' (Hustedt and Salomonsen, 2014) can be measured by the degree to which loyalty to the government of the day spills over into a more enthusiastic advocacy for its inherently partisan policy positions. Where the former stops and the latter starts is inevitably a question of perception. For example, in the UK in early 2014 Treasury Secretary Sir Nicholas Macpherson was accused of partisanship for agreeing to publicly release advice that was critical of Scotland being allowed to retain the British pound if it voted for independence

(Macpherson, 2014; Scotsman, 2014). In Australia in mid-2014 Treasury Secretary Martin Parkinson was perceived as having criticised the Labor Opposition with his remarks in a speech critiquing those who relied on 'vague notions of fairness' in criticising the government's budget (Parkinson, 2014; Bourke, 2014).

Such incidents have fed the concerns of scholarly critics (e.g. Aucoin, 2012; Savoie, 2008) who argue that Westminster system public services have become increasingly politicised in partisan ways, and that this is reflected in the roles that senior public servants are prepared to play in public. One of the strongest critiques is from the late Peter Aucoin, who has suggested that a form of 'promiscuous partisanship' is emerging.

The anonymity of public servants, as invisible to parliament or the public, disappeared some time ago. In the environment of NPG, moreover, ministers, sometimes explicitly, usually implicitly, expect those public servants who are seen and heard in countless public forums to support government policy, that is, to go beyond mere description and explanation...The expectation is not that they engage in the partisan political process, for example, at elections or political rallies. Rather, it is that they be promiscuously or serially partisan, that is, to be the agents of the government of the day in relation to stakeholders, organized interests, citizens, media, and parliamentarians as they engage in consultations, service delivery, media communications, reporting to parliament, and appearing before parliamentary committees. (Aucoin, 2012, 189)

In other words, according to Aucoin, the politicisation of public servants is reflected in their willingness to uncritically toe a government line in a wide range of public forums. The counter argument of course is that it has always been the role of civil servants to serve the executive government of the day. The difference, arguably, is that translating that type of service from a private to a public forum results in increased perceptions of politicisation, even if in reality civil servants are only loyally supporting the government of the day as they have always done. Public perceptions, once established, are inherently difficult for the individual actor to control. Shergold, reflecting on his own practice, notes that publicly explaining policy decisions: 'could, of course, easily be perceived to be spruiking their virtue' (Shergold, 2014, p. 86).

The claims of critics remain heavily contested, but even if they are correct, what is the way forward? If modern public servants have to participate as public figures in an era of transparency and accountability, is there a way in which they can do so without undermining Westminster conventions of non-partisanship and finding themselves branded as having become politicised? History suggests that it is not impossible. In the next section I undertake a detailed case study of the career of Charles Trevelyan to draw

out the synergies between the challenges confronting modern public service leaders and those faced by their mid-Victorian counterparts.

2. Charles Trevelyan – Case Study of a ‘Public’ Figure

...it has at last begun to be understood that the proper business of a Government, is to enable private individuals of every rank and profession in life, to carry on their several occupations with freedom and safety, and not itself to undertake the business of the landowner, merchant, money-lender, or any other function of social life (Trevelyan, 1848, p. 190).

Sir Charles Trevelyan was a man with strong opinions on government and what it should be doing. He wrote these words in 1848, at the height of his power as the permanent secretary to the Treasury in the United Kingdom (then known as ‘Assistant Secretary’). The words formed part of a book he published that year under the title *The Irish Crisis* – detailing the events of the great famine that had swept through Ireland over the preceding three years. Trevelyan knew a great deal about the famine, because it was his duty as Assistant Secretary at the Treasury to implement and oversee all famine relief measures throughout the period. So taken was he by his efforts that he took the time during the latter part of the crisis to write a two hundred page book about it – lauding the relief efforts and the good that would come out of the famine for Ireland as a whole.

A historiographical battle continues to rage over whether Charles Trevelyan was a cold-hearted bureaucrat who starved Ireland in its hour of need, or rather a benevolent civil servant who did everything he humanly could to avert the catastrophe (see Haines, 2004; Woodham-Smith, 1962; Trevelyan, 2012). That debate has raged for well over five decades, and shows little sign of slowing down, and I do not intend to add to it here. Rather, this paper seeks to examine the wider career of Trevelyan as head of the Treasury to analyse what his tenure demonstrates about the style and role of civil service leadership in the mid-Victorian era. What Trevelyan’s book on the Irish famine does show, is that he willingly embraced a public form of leadership – one prepared to engage openly in intense policy debates, rather than quietly working away in the shadow of his minister.

Scholars of the Civil Service will most readily of course associate Trevelyan’s name with the 1854 report that set the foundation stone for much of what is now considered central to a Westminster system civil service. Authored in partnership with Sir Stafford Northcote – a future Chancellor of the Exchequer – the Northcote-Trevelyan report ushered in selection on merit through examination, and advocated for a clearer delineation of labour between policy roles and more mechanical work. These were very significant proposals for change, and they took many years to actually be implemented. Even then, as Greenaway (2004, p. 9) points out, other Westminster fundamentals like

public service impartiality weren't embedded as part of Westminster convention until many years later.

Trevelyan is a man who has attracted considerable attention, both from his contemporaries and from writers since. To quote historian Henry Roseveare: 'Much has been written about Sir Charles Trevelyan – perhaps too much for a man with such highly developed gifts of self-advertisement' (Roseveare, 1969, p. 165). Trevelyan's career trajectory suggests that he was never going to be a man satisfied with hiding his intellectual light under the bushel of administrative niceties. Something of a prodigy, he made his name in Indian public administration as an East India Company civil servant in Delhi and then Calcutta from 1826 until 1838, when he returned to England. When appointed as Assistant Treasury Secretary in 1840, he was only in his early 30s and then distinguished himself by holding that role for the best part of the next twenty years.

Trevelyan was in many ways a man of his times. He was a restless intellectual, seized with the moral need to implement liberal ideas whilst maintaining an iron hand on the public finances in search of ever-greater efficiencies. He had been taught at the East India Company's civil service college 'Haileybury' by Thomas Malthus (see Gowan, 1987, pp. 14-16) and something of Malthus's darwinian attitudes may have rubbed off on the young Trevelyan, including in the latter's determination that the Civil Service should not be a place of ease (see Hart, 1960, p. 94). There was simply too much to do in Trevelyan's view to allow any civil servant to merely placidly administer the departments of state. To once more borrow from Roseveare's delightful turns of phrase, Trevelyan was intent on '[b]ounding through thickets of departmental incompetence like some bureaucratic hound of the Baskervilles...' (Roseveare, 1969, p. 165).

Most importantly for the arguments of this paper, Trevelyan was perceived to be a civil servant who was either unwilling or unable to avoid building a public persona of his own. He was as controversial a figure as any of his ministerial masters in his tenure at the Treasury. Such was his public infamy, that one of the period's most popular novelists created a caricature of him. Anthony Trollope's novel *The Three Clerks* created the character of 'Sir Gregory Hardlines', who the novelist admitted was modelled on Trevelyan. There must be few if any modern public service leaders who have achieved such fictional notoriety.

Trevelyan's name was always in the public eye, and not least due to the multiple debates in parliament centred in some part on Trevelyan's personality as an energetic evangelical for almost all kinds of government reform. Hansard from the period abounds with mentions of Trevelyan's name as his defenders and detractors in the Parliament clashed repeatedly. From debates over Trevelyan's handling of the Irish famine crisis, to his handling of military supplies during the Crimean War, the name of the Assistant Treasury to the Secretary appears ubiquitously. For example, in August 1848, there was a debate over whether Trevelyan should be paid a bonus for his

services during the famine, a payment that Disraeli asserted 'was surely conceived in rather bad taste' (Hansard, 14 Aug 1848, Series 3, Vol. 101 c. 139). The Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, sprang to Trevelyan's defence, asserting the primacy of ministerial responsibility for the work of civil servants. In the process, he confirmed that Trevelyan's reputation as a work-a-holic was well-deserved.

...whatever errors might have been committed, the Government were to blame for them. Sir C. Trevelyan stated in his evidence that he worked three hours before breakfast; that he then went to the Treasury, where he worked all day; and that the pressure upon him was such, that he wondered that he had been able to get through it alive. If the Government had done wrong in including the vote in the civil contingencies, he hoped that their error would not be visited upon one of the most intelligent and laborious officers that he had ever known. (Hansard, 14 Aug 1848, Series 3, Vol. 101, cc. 140-141)

Not all MPs were as generous in their views of Trevelyan. In 1853, reflecting on Trevelyan's recent evidence to a parliamentary committee, the Irish MP George Henry Moore did not hold back in his opinions, and they are worth quoting at length to capture the severity of the attack.

From one end of his evidence to the other, this self-satisfied functionary seems utterly unable to conceive the possibility of his having ever made a mistake, even the most trifling. To be sure nothing that he undertook succeeded—nothing that he anticipated came to pass—disaster followed every scheme he originated—and he aggravated every disaster by the remedies he applied. The conclusion to which he is led by these undeniable facts is, that every one was to blame except himself; and that Irish landlords, Irish ratepayers, Irish priests, Irish paupers, and a special divine providence for Ireland, were all in league to baffle the unerring sagacity of Sir C. Trevelyan... I see a dogmatist that no experience can instruct—a theorist that no evidence can enlighten—a practical blunderer, whose self-complacency failure only hardens and confirms, permitted to lean, if not to dominate, over the affairs of a country in which he is regarded by every class, sect, and party, with unanimous jealousy and distrust. (Hansard 7 April 1853, Series 3, Vol. 125, cc. 736-737)

Trevelyan was defended by his minister - the Chancellor of the Exchequer William Gladstone – who labelled Moore's comments a 'gross personal attack' on a civil servant unable to respond in kind (Hansard 7 April 1853, Series 3, Vol. 125, c. 755). Moore's response to Gladstone captures much about Trevelyan's status as a willing public figure in his own right.

The right hon. Gentleman said that he had made a personal charge against Sir Charles Trevelyan. What did he mean by a personal charge? Did he (Mr. Moore) make a charge against his private character? He spoke of him as a public character, and limited his remarks entirely to his public conduct, and to his published evidence; and the right hon. Gentleman arrogated a great deal too much for public servants if he thought that Members of Parliament should be prevented from arraigning their conduct when they exceeded their public duty. The right hon. Chancellor of the Exchequer said that Sir Charles Trevelyan was not in that House to defend himself; but he was everywhere else—whether as an official or a pamphleteer, whether in his public or his secret correspondence, he seemed to have devoted his leisure hours to the noble art of self-defence, which meant in his case, as in that of others, the art of assailing others. (Hansard 7 April 1853, Series 3, Vol. 125, c. 789)

Trevelyan demonstrated a combative style of public civil service leadership. His understanding of the need to be non-partisan did not mean he would allow himself to be cowed by parliamentarians or any other critics. It was a type of civil service leadership that was confident (critics would say arrogant) and more than able to engage fully in public policy arm-wrestles with all-comers. And he used whatever means, public or private, were available to him. For example, in relation to the supply of food provisions for the Crimean War, the War Secretary Sidney Herbert rose in parliament because he had been asked ‘to read the following letter from Sir Charles Trevelyan, who wished to place before the public the truth of the matter so far as he was concerned’ (Hansard 29 January 1855, Series 3, Vol. 136, c. 1120).

Ministers were not the only people to be seconded as Trevelyan’s mouthpieces when occasion demanded. He was equally adept at working closely with members of the fourth estate to influence public debate in favour of his objectives. This included his attempts to gain support for his vision of civil service reform as encapsulated in the Northcote-Trevelyan report. To quote historians Hughes and O’Brien: ‘Not the least interesting aspect of the ensuing controversy is the way in which Trevelyan primed the press, notably *The Times*, and systematically elicited influential opinion, ‘the best authorities’ as he called them, in support of his plan...’ (Trevelyan, Hughes and O’Brien, PART I, 1949, p. 64). This perceived influence extended to stopping debates when necessary, as when Gladstone became concerned about the level of Trevelyan’s engagement with the press. In a January 1854 letter to Gladstone, Trevelyan wrote: ‘I will immediately take the most effectual steps in my power to prevent any further discussion of the plan in the Newspapers and I shall be disappointed if I cannot do it effectually’ (cited in Trevelyan, Hughes and O’Brien, PART I, 1949, p. 71).

Other senior civil servants at the Treasury felt that the Northcote-Trevelyan report had been far too dismissive about the talents of current civil servants. Their

resentment extended to questioning the ways that Trevelyan sought to publicly prosecute his case through the media. George Arbuthnot, Auditor of the Civil List, wrote to Gladstone on several occasions denouncing Trevelyan's contacts with the press (Trevelyan, Hughes and O'Brien, PART II, 1949, pp. 207-8, 221-224). He objected equally strongly to the circulation of a pamphlet presumed to be by Trevelyan, which had been printed by the Foreign Office printer, and contained what Arbuthnot considered to be 'odious and reprehensible' descriptions of the existing civil service (Trevelyan, Hughes and O'Brien, PART II, 1949, p. 223)

Trevelyan was relentless - both in his appetite for reform and innovation and in his determination in pursuing it. In the early 1850's, he bombarded Gladstone with letters outlining his personal views on how and when the government should proceed on civil service reform. Civil Service advice can seldom have been as frank and fearless as it was when it flowed from the pen of C. Trevelyan. The rhetorical flair of his *Thoughts on Patronage* (see Trevelyan, Hughes and O'Brien, PART I, 1949, pp. 69-70) focussed more on vague charges of corruption and failure in the patronage system than on a systematic presentation of evidence on the topic. Its emotive tone makes breathtaking reading in comparison to the carefully weighed prose of the modern public service.

Of course, in addition to his vast private correspondence with leading figures, Trevelyan was perfectly happy to publish things under his own name or under a pseudonym if he thought it warranted. His 1848 monograph on *The Irish Crisis* was not intended to remain a reflective work intended only for the eyes of his colleagues. As Hart notes:

He sent it to everyone he could think of from the pope, the king of Prussia, and Guizot, to minor officials in the commissariat; and he was always quite certain the recipients would read it with interest, especially as it was 'prepared with so much labour and attention to accuracy', and since he was, in his view, in a better position than anyone else to write it. (Hart, 1960, p. 102)

He also maintained a prodigious output of letters to the press throughout his civil service career and into retirement – and they often drew controversy. For example, in the early 1840's he wrote a two-part letter to the *Morning Chronicle* under the pseudonym 'Philaethes' about the state of Ireland after the arrest of the popular leader Daniel O'Connell. Trevelyan was of course Assistant Secretary to the Treasury at the time, and had given a private briefing to the Prime Minister and Home Secretary on the state of Ireland – a briefing his political masters had thought would remain private. When the letters appeared in the *Morning Chronicle*, the indignant PM – Robert Peel – wrote to the Home Secretary, Sir James Graham, asking how Trevelyan '...could think it consistent with common decency to reveal to the Editor of the *Morning Chronicle* and to the world – all he told us...He must be a consummate fool' (cited in G. Kitson Clark, 1959, p. 31).

Whether or not Trevelyan was a fool was a matter of contemporary debate, but he certainly displayed remarkable political skills – and what might today be called ‘networking’ abilities – to publicly pursue his policy ends. He used the press at a time when it was the only available vehicle for reaching a mass audience in order to influence public debate. In addition to his several pseudonyms, whilst still Assistant Secretary at the Treasury he wrote under his own name to *The Times* about diverse topics including emigration policy for the Scottish Highlands in the 1850s, in 1847 about the nature of ‘Distress in Ireland’, in 1855 about military supplies in the Crimean War, and in 1858 on the ‘Western Bank of Scotland’ and a second letter debating the need for teaching Sanscrit to Civil Servants posted to India.

Trevelyan was an unapologetic political player, but not in an overtly partisan manner. He in fact believed fervently in non-partisanship. Trevelyan’s views were that a mandarin should be above party – insisting on in fact not voting in elections (Hart, 1960, p. 109) – but his own actions attest that this did not mean that civil service leaders should remain above politics broadly construed. All policy decisions were full of politics, and Trevelyan did not shy away from placing his own views on the public record, and publicly defending the actions he undertook as Treasury Assistant Secretary. For example, in his book on Ireland he was willing to attack by name the proposal of a leading conservative critic, Lord George Bentinck, for a large public works rail scheme (Trevelyan, 1848, p. 180).

Trevelyan instinctively understood that public policy does not operate in some kind of ‘apolitical’ parallel universe. He didn’t just quietly advise on public policy, he pursued it publicly and relentlessly through all avenues open to him. In doing so, he was following the methods of pioneering and reforming civil servants like Edwin Chadwick and Kay Shuttleworth (see G. Kitson Clark, 1959; Gowan 1987). As Kitson Clark writes of Chadwick’s social reforms, ‘...the schemes in question were his schemes and known to be so, warmly praised or bitterly attacked as the work of his hands. Neutrality would have been meaningless for him, anonymity was impossible’ (1959, p. 32). The same could easily be said for Trevelyan and many others of his contemporary mandarins. The collected views of mandarins on the changes proposed by the Northcote-Trevelyan Report, published in 1855 as *Papers Relating to the Re-Organization of the Civil Service*, show just how fiercely engaged senior civil servants were on the topic. This ranged from those, like James Stephen, who felt that the ‘obscurity’ of civil service work would not attract the best and the brightest (p. 75), through to Rowland Hill who lauded attempts ‘to purify and elevate the Public Service’ (p. 243). Trevelyan and his contemporaries were politically aware entrepreneurs of reform, with some willing to take part as active participants in public debate, whilst still jealously guarding their non-partisan status. Trevelyan’s success at maintaining that balance can be attested to by the fact that he remained in post for nearly twenty years, serving multiple ministries who inevitably defended his performance.

3. Non-Partisan Leadership in a Political Environment

The behaviour and leadership approach of Victorian civil service leaders like Charles Trevelyan serves as a reminder that the Westminster system has always been fluid. Conventions and traditions have evolved over time. The emergence of mandarins as increasingly public figures in the twenty-first century may represent a break with recent tradition, but that does not mean that the Westminster system is suddenly broken. Evolution involves change, but it is always change built on what was there before. So, for example, those modern mandarins who speak out in public debates have not suddenly abandoned their firm commitment to Westminster traditions of impartiality. Their willing emergence from anonymity has not translated into a willing embrace of partisanship. But the public nature of their modern role means that *perceptions* of partisanship are now perhaps harder to control than they were previously.

Modern mandarins have to walk a precarious public path between serving the government of the day and protecting their reputation as non-partisan administrators. Through their speeches, they are engaging in acts of public persuasion – both about what they and their departments are doing, and about what the policy challenges are that governments will have to address in the short, medium and longer term. They have become public rhetoricians who once only whispered to ministers behind the scenes and must now join them out on the front stage. And they have to do all of that without straying too far into the territory of contemporary political contestation.

The Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854 set the path for the emergence of a modern civil service. But the report's authors did not see leadership in the civil service as a task for obedient ciphers, but rather for independent men of sufficient character to be able to influence their ministerial masters. Trevelyan in fact planned for the fluid movement of civil servants in and out of politics, seeing the Civil Service as the perfect training ground for future politicians. In a letter to Delane, the editor of *The Times* newspaper, Trevelyan framed a stint in the civil service as the best way to understand the art of governing.

If the Civil Establishments were improved as we propose, men would be continually leaving them to go into Parliament. The Civil Administration would become the best school for Parliament, and the highly educated sons of our upper & middle classes would pass through the examinations into the Treasury & Foreign & Colonial & Home Offices of the Board of Trade or the Diplomatic Service and so on into Parliament as they do now in a limited and imperfect manner by acting as Private Secretaries. The want of a preliminary training of this sort is at present very perceptible in our political official men. The virtue of the new regime would, therefore, come back through Parliament to our administrative system; & while the

two parts of our Government would be alike raised to a higher standard, they would also be reduced to harmony with each other. (as cited in Greenaway, 2004, p. 10)

Trevelyan was a man of immense energy, infused with a zealous determination to reform British public administration. The written correspondence of his contemporaries shows that not all were convinced either of the rightness of his cause or the abrasiveness of his language in pursuing it. Trevelyan defended himself vigorously against such critiques, and certainly didn't let them moderate his single-mindedness. In a period of fluid transition, Trevelyan envisaged himself both as the architect and the archetype of a modern administrative meritocracy. He advocated for a civil service built in his own image. He foresaw an institution full of drive and fervour, where men of demonstrable merit could make their mark and receive their reward. It helps to explain why his emphasis was on questions of merit and systematisation rather than anonymity and being 'apolitical'. Trevelyan undoubtedly saw himself as someone who was politically engaged but impartial, and a man who had risen to great heights at a young age based on his great merit rather than through unwarranted patronage. In the Northcote-Trevelyan report, he sought to entrench this view of his experience as the basis for a new model of public administration.

Victorian Britain was a complicated place. It was an age of new complexity, rapid technological change, and social transformation. It was a fluid governance environment where much was decided by the personal energy and drive of civil servants willing to seize on reforming ideas and take them forward. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the period gave rise to a style of civil service leadership capable of meeting the exigencies of the age. Policy entrepreneurialism emerged amongst mandarins who were not scared to butt heads with politicians or with colleagues, and were quite willing to make their case publicly through the press or in front of parliamentary committees when necessary.

In essence, the changes that are emerging in the behaviour and leadership roles of contemporary public service leaders reflect the same challenges, albeit translated into a twenty-first century context. The certainties of bureaucratic governance in the social welfare state of the post-World-War-Two era have given way to a bewilderingly different governance environment. As in Victorian times, governance is once more a matter of negotiating through networks rather than command and control. Rapid technological change once again challenges entrenched ways of governing, this time through the advances of the digital rather than the industrial age. And the aggressively partisan politics of today mean that governments require new public actors able to make the case for longer-term reforms in an impartial way.

Whilst some of the current governance challenges are certainly reminiscent of the Victorian era, there are some unique factors that make pursuing a model of publicly transformative leadership more difficult today than it was for Trevelyan. Chief amongst

these is the 24/7 news cycle, which means that every public statement and action of mandarins is broadcast almost in real time, and without the opportunity for reflection available 150 years ago. Equally, the conventions of what a Westminster public servant can do have moved on considerably. The importance of neutral non-partisanship is now enshrined as the most defining feature of a Westminster bureaucracy. When a mandarin speaks publicly today, politicians and the press rush to frame those comments through partisan lenses, pulling public servants into political debates in which the policy can get lost amidst partisan rancour (Grube, 2014).

Charles Trevelyan was first and foremost an advocate, within and outside government, for policy ideas and administrative innovation. He was not a careful weigher of evidence that was then quietly whispered to ministers to see what they wished to do with it. He had clear ideas, backed them fiercely with persuasive rhetoric, and did so publicly if he thought it necessary. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the Northcote-Trevelyan report itself. It was a document full of rhetorical advocacy – of making a case about what was wrong with the Civil Service, based on assertion as much as it was based on evidence. To quote one historian, ‘...it was ostensibly based on months of detailed inquiry into government departments, but it remains transparently a remarkable piece of propaganda, a brilliant manifesto for views by no means wholly based on an objective appraisal of facts’ (Roseveare, 1969, pp. 168-9). Other historians have tempered that analysis by emphasising that the boldness of the language was backed up by more research than was included in the pages of the report itself. Multiple inquiries into various government departments had in fact occurred over the decade before 1854 to provide the wider evidential foundation on which the Northcote-Trevelyan report was built (see Wright 1969, pp. xiii-xxxv; Theakston 1999, pp. 22-29).

Trevelyan was a policy entrepreneur rather than a bureaucratic cog in an administrative machine. He was an innovator, a transformer who was willing to take risks, although not nearly as keen to take responsibility if those risks failed. Hennessy has asserted of 20th century mandarins that they were ‘scarcely household names in their own household.’ⁱ Trevelyan saw no such need to hide his light under a bushel – and indeed rather favoured a neon-sign approach to public leadership. In an age of rapid reform, Trevelyan was exactly the kind of reformer that politicians perceive themselves as wanting today. He was energetic, fearless, unconcerned with trampling on civil service tradition or upsetting those civil servants who did not see the need for reform. Trevelyan would have been quite at home in serving prime ministers like Thatcher and Blair to deliver civil service change.

Like today’s leaders, Trevelyan was faced with a differentiated polity of competing elites and non-government organisations who relied upon each other to effectively implement government policy in the absence of command and control options. The nineteenth-century British Civil Service was not a purring bureaucratic machine with controllers in bowler hats who simply had to pull levers to make things

run. This was a time of cobbled together reform coalitions trying desperately to cope with the leaps in governing complexity brought about by the technological advancements of the age, the demands of industry, and rampant population growth – with a civil service designed more for policy advice and routine copying of documents than for dynamic responses to social change.

Trevelyan and his contemporaries operated in an era that can best be described as a state of flux, even allowing for the fact that the Westminster system has always been the subject of evolutionary change. Conventions of ministerial responsibility and civil service impartiality and anonymity had not yet emerged in the form we know them today. Historian G. Kitson Clark has characterised the period 1830-1880 as one of transition. ‘...[I]n that period there are some of the most formidable divergencies in the behaviour of eminent officials from anything that could be called neutral or anonymous...It is certainly significant that one of the most notable offenders was Sir Charles Trevelyan himself’ (Kitson Clark, 1959, p. 30).

Today’s mandarins face pressures to become more public from at least two quarters. The transparency and accountability requirements of modern government have seen public service leaders held more rigorously and more publicly to account through forums like parliamentary committee hearings. These appearances in turn have received coverage through the voracious appetite of the 24/7 news media, boosting the profile of the public servants involved. Secondly, the complexities of network governance have seen senior public servants engage with a wider range of groups in a wider range of forums than was traditionally the case. Speeches at these engagement events are - through the advances of social media – made publicly available for critics and commentators to reflect upon. And at a time when scrutiny has never been greater, politicians in advanced democracies across the world are exhorting their public servants to be less risk averse and more willing to embrace new ideas.

Trevelyan’s career is a reminder that innovative risk-takers in the public service are magnets for controversy. The future of innovative public leadership by civil service mandarins may well rely on the willingness of politicians to actually embrace the reality of the kind of leadership they claim to want from public service leaders. If public statements by mandarins in policy debates are immediately met by finger pointing and accusations of partisanship by other MPs, it can only serve to make public servants even more risk averse. And yet their willingness to engage in public debates is central to successfully fulfilling their role in a modern governance environment where they have to reach out to multiple stakeholders simultaneously, whilst articulating a transformative leadership vision for their departments and the public service as a whole.

For example, former UK Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O’Donnell, former Australian Treasury Secretary Ken Henry, and former New Zealand Treasury Secretary John Whitehead all gave multiple speeches while in office on challenges like climate change, demographic change, and fiscal policy reform (Grube, 2012). Similarly, senior public

servants can find themselves questioned fiercely by parliamentary select committees charged with overseeing their work in ways that lead to a stronger public profile. For example, the British Cabinet Secretary Sir Jeremy Heywood was publicly chided by the Public Administration Committee for the perceived lack of depth in his investigation into allegations that the Government Chief Whip Andrew Mitchell had called police officers guarding the Downing Street gates ‘plebs’ (Ross, 2013; PAC, 2013). Whilst not directly accusing Heywood of having become politicised, the committee did criticise his decision to agree to undertake the review when they considered it to be outside the legitimate scope of his work as Cabinet Secretary.

Those senior public servants who engage in ‘Trevelyanite’ behaviour in publicly contributing on policy questions can – like Trevelyan – find themselves fiercely criticised, and yet continue to be seen as very effective public administrators. For example, while in office, former British Cabinet Secretary Gus O’Donnell agreed to co-edit a book with Ed Balls, then a political adviser to the British Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown (Balls, O’Donnell and Grice, 2004). The book, published by the Treasury, explained the microeconomic reforms being pursued by the Blair government. Critics like Aucoin characterise the book as an example of the ‘promiscuous partisanship’ he was warning against (Aucoin, 2012, 189). Despite such criticism, O’Donnell went on to serve both Labour and Conservative governments and retired at the end of 2011 as a civil servant who continued to command the confidence of all sides of politics. This suggests that a ‘Trevelyanite’ willingness to substantively contribute to public discussion need not necessarily lead to a loss of trust in impartial public administrators.

Similarly, following the death of Margaret Thatcher in 2013, the Cabinet Secretary Jeremy Heywood and the Head of the Civil Service Bob Kerslake co-authored a newspaper article in the London *Telegraph*, reflecting on what it had been like as a public servant to work for Prime Minister Thatcher. Whilst not containing any overt support for particular Thatcherite policies, the article was heavily criticised by MPs from the opposition Labour Party for its general lack of acknowledgement of any criticism of Thatcher and her policies. The two Civil Servants were accused by one MP of having ‘prostituted your high office and deserted your political neutrality’ (Syal, 2013). Whilst thus becoming a matter of temporary political debate, there is little evidence that the episode has caused long-term damage to the ability of both men to command bi-partisan respect. At the time of writing, both retain their permanent secretary appointments, although Kerslake has relinquished the role of Head of the Civil Service.

Ultimately, the test of whether the Westminster system can allow a Trevelyanite level of public interaction without being seen as becoming politicised rests not just on where mandarins perceive lines to be, but on the willingness of politicians to extend a license to comment. Once MPs become intolerant of mandarins daring to venture a public view on aspects of policy and act to remove them because of it, the degree of licence Trevelyan was able to rely upon breaks down. For example, the incoming Abbott government in Australia in 2013 sacked three departmental heads and a fourth – Martin

Parkinson – agreed to move on within the year. At least in part, this was seen in the media as a response to the extent to which some of the senior public servants had become publicly associated with the policy positions of the previous government (e.g. Towell, 2013; Mannheim, 2013).

So Trevelyan provides a prototype of sorts – but his is certainly not an approach well-tailored to the risk averse. His career demonstrates how one could be noisy, risky, even controversial, and still be a widely respected Westminster public servant. That is no mean feat, although if anything the task has become even more difficult for contemporary mandarins who may wish to adopt a similar approach. It is arguable that the twenty-first century governance environment, with its focus on transparency, accountability, and delivery – all under the watchful eye of a 24/7 media – is not likely to be as forgiving of public service leaders who pursue goals with a single-minded indifference to the views of critics. The experiences of Sir Nicholas Macpherson and Martin Parkinson alluded to earlier demonstrate that allegations of partisanship are easier to make than they are to refute. But in embracing opportunities for ‘public’ leadership, today’s senior public servants are demonstrating the kind of skills necessary to operate in a governance environment in which public persuasion is a growing part of their role. In doing so, modern leaders are connecting with an older, more publicly engaged and publicly combative tradition of civil service leadership, as exemplified by Trevelyan.

Today’s mandarins operate in a time of great governance complexity. They have to engage with a differentiated and often disjointed polity, relying on networks of actors in order to deliver the outcomes sought by governments. They do this whilst under the scrutiny of a powerful and often abrasive media and in the teeth of intense partisan debates at a political level. Public service leaders are responding by displaying the skills demanded by the exigencies of the time. They are prepared to publicly lead through speeches and engagement with the media in order to stimulate and progress debates on major issues. In some cases they are willing to do so even if it means coming into conflict with politicians. The career of Charles Trevelyan shows that it’s been done before, and that it’s possible to do it without destroying the fundamentals of the Westminster system of government.

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ⁱ Quoted in BBC 2011 Documentary, 'The Secret World of Whitehall.'