

# Groupthink, partisanship, and the end of Whitehall



**Patrick Diamond** writes that the traditional Whitehall model is being replaced by a system centred on politicised campaigning and run by partisan appointees. These institutional changes are unfolding at a critical moment in British politics, as Whitehall prepares to support Ministers in carrying out Brexit, and render the government machinery more vulnerable to groupthink and partisanship than ever before.

Throughout my book on *The End of Whitehall*, two principal arguments are made about the bureaucratic machinery of the central British state. The first is that a review of the evidence supports the claim that Whitehall has drastically changed over the last thirty years. In the British administrative tradition, civil servants were loyal to the government of the day, not the political party comprising the government. That convention has been turned on its head. Now, officials are beholden to the governing party's agenda and its partisan motives.

The second point relates to the long-term consequences of change: undermining the Whitehall paradigm has been detrimental to the quality of statecraft. The institutions of the British state now operate according to the imperatives of the 'permanent campaign' and what Peter Aucoin terms 'the New Political Governance'. The motivation of advisers and appointees in Whitehall is overtly partisan, focused on loyalty to the Minister. Ministerial interference in the appointment of civil servants undermines the values of the Northcote-Trevelyan settlement. Officials are required to implement policies they played little or no role in formulating. Those who raise their heads above the parapet risk being ostracised. The UK's government machinery is more vulnerable to 'groupthink' and 'promiscuous partisanship'. The Whitehall model is dissipating. Mandarins are no longer esteemed policy advisers upholding the values of public service, but managers of contracts beholden to the neo-liberal state. The civil service [have been transformed](#) from 'guardians of the public realm' to 'agents of the market state'. It would be a struggle to claim that the contemporary state bureaucracy in the UK is 'pervaded by a tone of impartial public-spiritedness' (Cannadine 2017: 296).



All recent governments have been complicit in the denigration of the Whitehall model. Aucoin rightly inferred there have been major changes in the state bureaucracy, the consequence of a long-term transformation in the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats. Civil servants are no longer expected to highlight difficulties or point out that there are alternative ways of addressing problems; their role is to justify what politicians already decided to do, 'rigorously' implementing Ministers' ideas (Leys 2006). The commitment of civil servants and Ministers to a shared view of the state as advancing the public good has withered. The shrinking of UK government after a decade of austerity has been a further driver of change.

The undermining of the Whitehall model is unquestionably detrimental to effective governance. A report on the Treasury's role in the financial crisis by the Second Permanent Secretary, Sharon White, [underlined the risks](#) posed by cuts and restructuring. The 'fiasco' over the West Coast mainline, where the franchise tendering process was cancelled following a successful legal challenge by the train operating companies, exposed major problems. The Laidlaw report emphasised concerns raised in the 'first wave' of governance literature during the 1990s about the erosion of state capacity and the 'hollowing-out' of the public sector (Rhodes 1994). The paradox was that Ministers sought to intensify political control over the bureaucratic machinery, while encouraging a more disaggregated approach to policy-making and implementation. The emphasis on contestability and outsourcing of delivery undermined the vertical authority of Ministers. Oliver Letwin [complained bitterly](#) that 'subject specialists' had been side-lined in favour of management experts. Ministers who made policy were increasingly detached from 'managers' and 'street-level bureaucrats'. The divergence began in the late 1980s as 'arms-length' *Next Steps* agencies were separated from departments. The Public Administration Select Committee [warned of a](#) 'further fracture between policy generation and delivery'. Forty years of research drawing on countless implementation case-studies reinforced the point: 'policy design and implementation cannot and should not be separated' (Norris et. al. 2014: 12). Yet in the British administrative tradition, policy formulation and delivery are being pulled apart relentlessly.

All of the evidence makes it necessary to dispute the [Institute for Government's claim](#) that, 'the day-to-day business of government looks much the same' as it did twenty or thirty years ago. Not only have there been major changes in the state bureaucracy, but civil servants have been '[subject to an assault by politicians that was unprecedented in this century](#)'. As a consequence, and in the words of a former Treasury and Cabinet Office official, 'the senior ranks of the civil service [are] massively demoralised...You were taking a cadre of people who were crucial to running the country and turning them into functionaries'. Colin Kidd [wrote that during May's premiership](#), 'The Blairite informality of shirtsleeve, sofa government gave way to...decision making in the closet by over-mighty court favourites who seemed to control a less confident ruler'.

In Britain, civil servants are expected to do exactly what the Prime Minister and secretaries of state require (Savoie 2008: 337). Political advisers and aides dominate Whitehall where partisan imperatives now prevail. When Ministers take exception to advice, they establish 'independent' commissions of experts who feed in *ad hoc* opinions. On issues likely to affect the governing party's electoral prospects, the centre enforces 'message control'. Civil servants depend on a favourable reputation among politicians to gain promotion. They are expected to enthusiastically support initiatives and carry out the orders of their political masters. The public service ethic encapsulated in the doctrines of Northcote-Trevelyan and Haldane has been worn away. Weber's vital distinction between 'administration' and 'politics' no longer holds true in British governance.

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### About the Author



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