

## **Liberal Conservatism, 'Boardization' and the Government of Civil Servants**

### **Abstract**

**Drawing inspiration from the loosely coupled genre of studies of governmentality, this paper explores the emergence in Britain during the early years of the millennium of a distinctive liberal conservative scheme for the government of civil servants. The term 'boardization' has been used to characterise the trend to reproduce the technology of the board of directors in central government. Conservatives currently assign a distinctive role to the work of departmental 'boards' in the effective management of the Civil Service. Intimating the costs and risks of the Conservatives' programme, we explore the role of diverse governmental forces in the emergence of the boards of the Civil Service as an object for action and intervention during the early years of the new millennium. We explore a mutation in the application of practices and techniques drawn from the domain of the business enterprise to the organization of the Civil Service.**

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## **Introduction**

Changes in administrative practice in the British Civil Service in the years of the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s are commonly associated with a certain consistency of style, a manifestation of the loosely coupled regime of administration that came to be known as ‘the new public management’ (Hood, 1991). From the early 1980s, with the aim of enhancing efficiency and curtailing the expansionary tendencies of bureaucracy (Niskanen, 1973), British civil servants were made responsible for budgets and accountable for the achievement of performance objectives in new ways. An array of economy measures were pursued. The reforms of the later 1980s and 1990s introduced agency arrangements to the Civil Service, new customer charters and simulated market mechanisms. Expectations of the qualities of the bureaucrat altered during these years as politicians affirmed the virtues of enterprise, responsibility and initiative. However, by the turn of the millennium British Conservatives were offering seemingly new prescriptions for the management of civil servants. This paper considers the work of diverse groups, directly and indirectly connected with the Conservatives, in developing a particular approach to the management of the British Civil Service during the early years of the new millennium. In June 2010 the Minister with responsibility for the Cabinet Office announced the former Chief Executive of BP Lord Browne as the Government’s lead non executive director (Cabinet Office, 2010). Browne, it was said, would assist in making the centre of British government work in a ‘business like’ way, in improving the ‘governance’ of the Civil Service and, most especially, the working of ‘departmental boards’(Cabinet

Office, 2010). This discussion explores the emergence of the technology of ‘the board’ as a key target for action for the Conservatives during the years between 2001 – 2009.

We locate Conservative interest in the boards of the Civil Service in the context of the development of a broader rationality of government fashioned by an array of experts and authorities. During the early years of the millennium a discourse with a distinctive, reflexive and critical perspective on the management of the Civil Service began to take shape. Conservatives and their allies imagined a new era of ‘modern management’ in the Civil Service taking issue with what they judged to be glib and ineffective in the management schemes of their opponents. Yet ‘modern management’ would not entail a break with the managerial concerns of the New Public Management (NPM). Rather, we are concerned with a mutation in thinking about the deployment of management practices in the Civil Service. Conservatives desired an array of management reforms. There were, for example, to be more effective forms of rewarding operational excellence, of dealing with the ‘poor performer’ and deploying the skills of civil servants. But, above all perhaps, the departmental board became the central target for intervention for an alliance of influential political forces during these years.

Inspired by those who have drawn on the later Foucault (1982; 1991) working in the field of studies of governmentality, the concern is to reflect historically and critically on this scheme for the government of civil servants. Critics (Hood, 1991; Pollitt, 1993; du Gay, 2000) of earlier Conservative reforms in the Civil Service raised an array of criticism of the perverse effects and dangers of the ‘lionisation’ (Fournier and Grey, 2000) of

management in that era. In turn we raise the question of the costs of a new era of Conservative reform. To what extent have Conservatives transcended the difficulties of an earlier era of management reform in the Civil Service ? We explore these developments against a background of shifting political and economic conditions during the first decade of the new millennium. If by 2009 a set of ideas concerning the role of the departmental board in the government of civil servants had acquired a certain coherence, an array of separate historical developments must be understood. On the one hand, we are concerned with critiques and arguments over the problem of the Civil Service during the early years of the new millennium and the rise of the very idea of ‘modern management’. On the other hand, we are concerned with the emergence of the departmental board as a target for political debate, action and intervention. Diverse governmental forces - at work both inside and outside the formal political process - debated the condition of the Civil Service during these years, problematising the ‘strategic’ capabilities and leadership of departments and calling their ‘governance’ arrangements into question. The term ‘boardization’ was coined to characterise a trend to reproduce the technology of the board of directors in central government (Wilkes, 2007). Though distancing themselves from their regime of targets, surveillance and control from the centre, Conservatives would take much from the schemes and experiences of their political opponents. Conservative thought, as we will see, was informed by this debate as the boards of departments emerged as decisive targets for action and intervention for an alliance of political forces

**On the perspective of governmentality**

The loosely coupled genre of studies of governmentality (Dean, 1999; Miller and Rose, 1990; Miller and Rose, 2008; Rose, 1999) has provided a number of insightful, historically informed analyses of relevance to organization and management studies. At an abstract level, such studies are concerned with the more calculated forms of the exercise of power, highlighting the diversity of powers and governing authorities which seek to regulate the subject's space of freedom. Evoking an early modern usage, the word 'governing' relates to any attempt to shape or mould the conduct of others (Foucault, 1982; Rose, 1999). Interest turns to the discursive character of 'rule', the language that authorities and experts use to imagine and define the subjects they aspire to govern, as well as the technical methods of influence and inscription that they put to work (Foucault, 1982). Government is conceived at once as a linguistic or discursive and 'technological' activity to the extent that it relies on instruments and technical procedures in relation to the targets of its intervention. The problem of government breaks down into an analysis of the concepts, arguments and procedures by which 'rule' comes to be enacted. Activities of government and modes of knowledge are understood to interconnect in diverse ways. Governing always relies on a certain framing of objectives or a certain manner of reasoning. Practices which monitor, inscribe and record the activity of the governed facilitate the activity of those who rule. A distinctive feature of contemporary liberal regimes of government is the proliferation of modes of expert knowledge. An array of experts, laying claim to knowledgeable, neutral and efficacious competence, pass judgement on diverse governmental questions.

Less an attempt to apply Foucault as to work creatively with his thought and methods of working, systematic expositions of the genre suggest a form of analysis that embraces both the historical and systematizing dimensions of genealogical critique. Studies of governmentality seek to capture not only the overall logic of the games of truth or rationalities of a decentred political field, but also the process by which they took shape. Historically informed enquiry seeks to reveal the contingencies by which the present was formed. Games of truth are shown to have been different to those to which we are accustomed (Rose, 1999). Studies of governmentality therefore aim to enhance our awareness that what we are is not given or inevitable, thereby enhancing the contestability of the present moment.

Studies of governmentality have been especially concerned to shed light on the shifting rationalities for the government of work. Influential early work highlighted the transformations associated with the emergence of a so called neo liberal or advanced liberal rationality in Britain with the ascendancy of the New Right from the late 1970's (Miller and Rose, 1990; du Gay, 1996). Foregrounding revisions to management thought and technologies in the context of the changing aims of the State, analysts of governmentality shed light on the part which multiple agencies of government - an array of experts, a loose alliance of consultants, business academics, gurus and agencies connected to the state - played in forging apparently new ways of imagining and acting on the productive subject at work. The key leitmotif became that of enterprise and self responsibility: the cultivation of such qualities in bureaucrats, managers, indeed all citizens became the aim of an array of governing agencies.

Yet critics have raised a number of problems with the genre which seem to require some re-thinking. There has been significant critical commentary on the alleged shortcomings of the genre from without, often with a strongly anti – Foucauldian flavour (eg Armstrong, 2001; Kerr, 1999). But those seeking to develop the genre also highlight an array of limitations (Barratt, 2008; McKinlay, 2010; McKinlay et al, 2010; O’Malley et al, 1997). In part the challenge is to a common reliance on, and consequent overvaluation of, official textual sources and programmes. There is a need to move beyond the study of texts of rule, to an exploration of the practical dynamics of government at an organisational level. For the analysts of governmentality, it has been argued, the possibilities of exploring the manner in which broad concepts are translated into practices on the ground remains largely uncharted (McKinlay et al, 2010). Instances of the genre incline, it has been claimed (O’Malley et al, 1997), towards excessive generalisation. Excessive attention is given to the characterisation of abstract and general rationalities of government: especially neo liberal and advanced liberal regimes of government. As one commentator puts it: ‘the seductive appeal of the ‘aerial’ view of the world seems to win out over careful research into the local and partial, with the consequence that the analytics and concepts of government are drawn back into the ambit of a refashioned grand theory’ (Walters, 2012, p.114). Concepts, classifications, instruments and procedures of government have a complex history which historical analysis should seek to unravel at a level of detail often claimed to be untypical of the genre (O’Malley, et al, 1997; McKinlay, 2010; McKinlay et al, 2010). Greater attention needs to be given to the struggles out of which ideas and practices were born and the complex and contingent process by which they took shape.

Studies of governmentality not uncommonly render historical events without reference to individual or collective agents (McKinlay et al, 2010, Walters, 2012), suggesting an implausible ‘anonymity’ in their analyses. Sympathetic critics point also to a tendency towards the avoidance of critique. There is a diagnostic element, present in Foucault (O’Malley et al, 1997), that is frequently absent in the genre.

Responding to the criticisms we have been considering, we offer here one, provisional way of framing how the genre might be usefully extended, recognising that that there will always be other interpretations and that stated positions should always be left open to the possibility of later revision. Seeking to reform rather than to interrupt, the adjustments we suggest here give particular emphasis to the nominalist and contingent character of genealogical inquiry (Bevir, 2010; O’Malley, 1997; Walters, 2012). Reflecting our nominalist concerns, the aim is to restore an attention to the specificity of practices of governing subjects in particular institutional settings, focusing on the emergence of a distinctive rationality for the government of civil servants and, most especially, a particular technology designed to give effect to a set of ideals. If those in party political circles who aspire to govern frame their ends in a certain way and come to view the boards of the Civil Service as a privileged mechanism for the realisation of those ends, the aim ultimately is to reveal the diverse relations and processes by which such a way of thinking came to be assembled (Dean, 1999, p.31). We assume, like Dean and Hindess (1998), that analysis should begin with the moment of problematisation: how a certain way of governing conduct was called into question in a definite social setting. We assume also, that the aim of the genealogist is to develop ‘compelling narratives’ (Bevir, 2010, p.430), tracing the



history and consequences of modes of belief and action, 'grey and meticulous' in their orientation to truth (Foucault, 2000).

We seek, then, to reveal the connections, encounters and plays of forces that leads, at a given moment, to a particular manner of conceiving how civil servants should be governed (Dean, 1999). A nominalist interest in historical particularity is matched by a concern to capture the element of chance and uncertainty in the emergence of a particular order of truth, with such contingency arising from various conditions. We assume that historical actors depend on prior frameworks of thought for the manner in which they reason and act. But, after Nietzsche (2008), the ideas of the past can always be interpreted anew or redirected to new ends. As Bevir argues, change occurs contingently as people 'interpret, modify or transform an inherited tradition in response to novel circumstances or other dilemmas' (Bevir, 2010, p.426). We are similarly indebted to a Nietzschean radical historicism (Bevir, 2010) in foregrounding the element of struggle, contestation and the suppression of alternatives in the emergence of a particular scheme of rule. Attention turns, in our case, to the role of disparate political factions and expert voices and the alliances and tactics they pursue against a background of the uncertain struggle for advantage in a liberal democratic polity.

We assume also that the aim of an 'historian of the present' (Foucault, 1977) is to ground substantive investigation clearly in what the critic judges to be the problems of a particular historical time. History becomes a resource for dissipating the present, enumerating costs and risks and inciting others to acts of political reinvention (Dean, 1999). It is especially

by revealing the fragile processes of the emergence and construction of present forms of rule that the study of governmentality seeks to achieve its ethico – political aims. No longer must we view certain forms of thought and action as necessary or inevitable. Accordingly, it is to the examination of an array of think tank publications, government ‘White Papers’, research reports prepared by the officers of government, speeches of prominent politicians, as well as relevant secondary sources that we now turn in an effort to capture the slow emergence of a singular game of truth.

### **Liberal conservatism and the critique of ‘micromanagement’**

For the moment of ‘problematization’ in the emergence of the scheme of government with which we are concerned, we should look to debates among Conservatives at the turn of the millennium. For these critics, as we will see, at the heart of the errors and mistakes of their opponents in respect of the Civil Service lay a basic deficiency in administrative style. Arguments about the need to rethink the organisation of the public sector in Conservative circles first began to emerge in the aftermath of the electoral defeat of 1997. Conservatives, it was argued, had failed to invest adequately in essential services and had become associated with hostility to public servants. The new leadership argued the case for change only to be forced to retreat by opponents on the right (Bale, 2011). Yet by the turn of the millennium new voices from outside the hierarchy were beginning to raise the problem of the public services once again (Cooper, 2001).

Conservative ‘modernisers’ took as their part of departure certain distinctive features of the administrative style of their opponents. Tony Blair imagined himself as the Chief

Executive Officer of a major enterprise, setting a coherent and ‘joined up’ policy direction, seeing that direction was followed through at the level of the departments of government and that outcomes were effectively measured (Blair, 2010, p. 338). ‘Public Service Agreements’ were applied to the departments of government by the Treasury, including outcome and process requirements. A key aim was to improve the responsiveness of departments to political goals, particularly in respect of the promotion of quality and choice in the delivery of public services. Performance management became a crucial management technology during these years.

But for Conservative ‘modernisers’ at the turn of the millennium, such elements of the favoured administrative style of their opponents constituted a substantial weakness. A decisive contribution emerged from a new think tank: Policy Exchange, formed in 2001, with the aim of furnishing ideas that would help to fashion a genuinely ‘modern’ conservatism. The first contribution of the group that lead the new think tank in its early years came in the form of an edited collection, including discussion of new directions for the organization of public services (Vaizey, et al, 2001). There was no common view uniting all contributors to this collection. For the editors, however, the aim should not be to look back to an earlier political era. On the organization of the economy the Conservatives had won the argument with their opponents. The vital political questions of the moment lay elsewhere: public service provision and the effects of social change. At the heart of the errors and mistakes of their opponents lay a basic deficiency in administrative style: a faith in design and an obsession with ‘micromanagement’. No longer were civil servants simply utility maximising agents with a dangerous inclination to expand their responsibilities and

budgets for personal gain, as understood by the theorists of public choice (Niskanen, 1973). Rather, the central problem lay, as these conservative intellectuals saw it, in the application of an alien and ineffective theoretical model of management: an approach that stifled the wisdom and initiative of the civil servant. Planning systems of this type, it was believed, had the further effect of restricting the diversity of provision. Government departments of any size were inevitably too complex to run from the political centre (Boles, 2001). There was an acknowledgement of the complicity of the Conservatives of the 1980s and 1990s in this state of affairs, but the party's opponents had greatly extended the managerial systems initiated during those years. 'New Labour' betrayed an instinctive socialist 'will to control', leaving the public servant at the mercy of the centre of government and its control regime. The regime of process targets set and monitored, augmented by systems of audit, had demoralised the majority of civil servants, depriving them of the means of exercising their 'professional judgement'. Good government, the editors argued, set limits to its own power and showed greater respect for the knowledge and 'professionalism' of the public servant and the ideas, talent and innovation present in all citizens. The editors prescribed no specific solution to the critique they developed. Rather, they gestured towards a future political debate. Whatever path would be chosen by the Conservatives, it was assumed that both party members and public sector professionals should play an active role in its development. The sense of a need for new measures to address new times was thus strongly cued in the arguments of these Conservative intellectuals writing at the turn of the millennium, as they sought to reposition their party in the struggle for party political advantage.

During the early years of its existence, there were conscious efforts to promote their arguments and critiques by members of the new think tank. Particular effort appears to have been directed at the Party's grassroots at fringe events and road – shows (Snowden, 2010). Consistent with the typical modus operandi of the modern think tank: that of the mediator Osborne (2004), the aim was to occupy a position in a network of political actors. Alliances were forged with sympathetic forces emerging in the early years of the new millennium. In the political circles around the new leadership after 2001, there were forces at work with much in common with the analysts of Policy Exchange. Articulated in the paternalistic language of 'one nation conservatism', their concerns were with the condition of the poor and the erosion of social bonds (Duncan Smith et al, 2002). It would be through the action of 'civil society' that the ills of society would be cured. Yet here again, the problems of governing civil servants were framed in a similar way. Not only did welfare provision foster dependency in the poor and inhibit the philanthropic instincts of citizens, the necessary incompetence of bureaucrats in the administrative centre contributed to an array of social problems.

At the same time, Conservative researchers wrote of 'New Labour's' command state, of management processes that constituted a 'deluge of interference' in the operations of front line public servants (Clark and Mather, 2003, p. 2 ). Professional and provider institutions should be trusted to get on with their work in a decentralised public service regime, where the principles of choice or democratic control should prevail. Others wrote of a 'rationalist fallacy' embodied in the management schemes of the British Treasury (Jenkins, 2004, p.22).

It would take a period of several years for the arguments espoused by the ‘modernisers’ of Policy Exchange and their allies to gain ground in the Conservative hierarchy. In the main, members of the party remained committed to more familiar political themes. But during 2004, as the party faced the prospect of further electoral defeat, an alliance began to form in the political networks of west London: a select and interconnected group of conservatives centred in the metropolis. Members of Policy Exchange were drawn into an association with other intellectuals: agents involved in policy development at Conservative Central Office, including the MP and Head of Policy Coordination David Cameron and his associates George Osborne and Steve Hilton, as well as members of the press. This was not an organised movement but a loose alliance united above all by a concern to revisit the varied resources of conservative discourse to fashion new directions for the party and to promote their ideas in party political circles. Assisted by the continuing deterioration of the Conservatives’ electoral fortunes, the manoeuvring for advantage and authority in the party by this faction would ultimately be successful.

On more than one occasion, David Cameron (2005; 2011) has referred to Policy Exchange as being at the heart of a liberal conservative ‘revolution’. The themes we have been reviewing were certainly present in early speeches (Cameron, 2005; 2006). In 2006, for example, Cameron (2006) affirmed the inherent professionalism of the civil servant against those who were all too ready to present a mere caricature. There was an ‘automatic and lazy assumption’ that standards of service among public servants were invariably poor. The ideologues of ‘New Labour’, as well as the forces of dogma and reaction among the

Conservatives, were equally at fault in this regard. The failings of the Civil Service ‘New Labour’ had sought to highlight were, in reality, a reflection of their ineffective political schemes. It was a matter of ‘accepted common sense’ that the private sector had no monopoly on excellence in serving the public. Nevertheless, the full potential of public service professionals had still to be fully realised. Where their opponents all too readily preferred to ‘look over the shoulder’ of the public servant, Conservatives would trust in their inherent professionalism, releasing them from the grip of an ‘ineffective’ management regime. What was required now was a new era of ‘modern management’ in the public services.

In the analyses and arguments of this era, then, Conservatives consistently evoked the need for ‘modernisation’ in respect of the organisation of the Civil Service and the public sector more generally. Yet for all the affirmation of novelty, there were echoes in the arguments at this time of an earlier era of controversy and reconstruction on the political right. After the Second World War, in the context of the quickening pace of collectivism (Green, 2002), Conservatives engaged in a self-conscious examination of their political aspirations and objectives. Critiques and prescriptions took a number of different forms (Gamble, 1974; Cockett, 1995). There was, however, one particularly influential discourse: notions of the inherent limits of political knowledge, as contrasted with the customary knowledge and liberty enshrined in civil society and its institutions, structured a whole field of debate after the middle years of the 1940s (White, 1950; Hogg, 1947; Oakeshott, 1947).

Conservative Parliamentarians and intellectuals of the 1940s and 1950s, much like the theorists in the early years of the millennium, were concerned to return to the resources of conservative discourse to fashion a response to new circumstances and problems, making conservatism a living doctrine in the style that Burke recommended. Edmund Burke (2004) bequeathed to these modern liberal conservatives a deep suspicion of the application of a priori schemes to political affairs. The limits of human reason and the complexity of the social order, Burke argued, rendered all such schemes an inferior basis for political action. Government in accordance with the customs and conventions of society was to be preferred. Burke can of course be placed in a long line of English political theorists, beginning with Hooker in the late sixteenth century (Quinton, 1976). His achievement was to add a distinctive liberalism to the customs and traditions of the English (Boyd, 2004). Yet all borrowed much from the arguments of the sceptics of the Hellenistic era (Lom, 2001), adapting arguments concerning the limits of reason and the place of custom and convention in human existence for political purposes (Pocock, 1960). With the revival of such elements of conservative discourse in the 2000s new forms of political critique thus became possible directed, as we have seen, at the performance management practices of the administrative centre of the Civil Service.

### **‘New Labour’ and the governance of the Civil Service**

Beyond the arguments and critiques of the Conservative ‘modernisers’, other separate developments in the application of ideas and practices borrowed from the domain of enterprise require consideration. We turn away, then, from the influence of political theory to the role of a more practical form of knowledge in the assemblage of a particular regime



of government. In particular, efforts to enhance the strategic capability of the Civil Service during the 'New Labour' years took a variety of different forms (Kavanagh and Richards, 2001; Chapman and O'Toole, 2010). For 'New Labour' innovations in the deployment of management techniques and simulated market processes (Cabinet Office, 1999) under the Conservative leaderships of Thatcher and Major had been largely positive in their effects. But Conservative reforms had tended to fragment bureaucracy, exacerbating the characteristic 'departmentalism' of the bureaucrat: the tendency to promote the interests and customary knowledge of the department (Richards, 2007).

'New Labour' turned increasingly to outside sources for advice, initiating fresh, long term strategic thinking and seeking to coordinate the strategic decisions of departments. Competence dictionaries prescribing the norms of excellent performance allied to pay, appraisal and development practices formed a framework within which the senior civil servant was expected to reconstitute him or herself as a proactive agent in the strategic management processes of government (Blair, 2010; Horton and Farnham, 2002). But efforts to promote the new strategic sensibility in the years after 2005 (Wilkes, 2007) also included the deployment of the technology of the 'departmental board'. The notion that social practices analogous to those of the unitary board of the public limited company had a part to play in the organization of the Civil Service was not a new one. The Griffiths Report into the National Health Service (Griffiths Report, 1983) not only argued for a coherent system of management at local level. There was also the need for a more clearly defined 'general management' function in the Department. A board of 'executives' and 'non executives' to initiate and oversee the changes was prescribed. During the 1980s and

1990s, boards of a similar design emerged in a number of Civil Service departments, in ad hoc fashion reflecting the beliefs of particular departmental leaders rather than any wider political scheme. But the Treasury initiative of 2005 marked a departure (Treasury, 2005). Henceforward, the establishment of boards in both agencies and departments became effectively mandatory.

'New Labour' (Blair, 2006) presented the boards of the departments as a necessary response to a set of social conditions, a mechanism for enabling the Civil Service to transcend an inherent conservatism and institutional inertia. The established machinery of government was simply unsuited to the conditions of the time. The argument evokes a familiar sociological inflection in the discourse of 'New Labour' (Finlayson, 2003). Advances in new technology had not only made available new options for the delivery of services. It had also encouraged new, more sophisticated and demanding consumers, to whom governments were compelled to respond (Blair, 2006, p.1). Ultimately, the argument relied on a fundamental binary division: the unresponsive, ill adapted and producer led bureaucracy of the traditional Civil Service department set against the new model, reconfigured department, with the departmental board at its strategic centre.

Departments would therefore be managed by an 'effective board' supporting ministers by setting the department's 'standards and values', 'taking forward' the strategic aims of the department, 'taking ownership' of the management of performance and advising on questions of finance and human resource management (Treasury, 2005). Boards, with leadership and strategic roles, had thus become of some importance in the effort to

enhance the management of ‘delivery’ and performance in the Civil Service. With the development of interest in the boards of departments, the principles of ‘board responsibility’ and ‘corporate decision making’, adapted from the norms of the unitary board of the public limited company as these had been coded explicitly in the years after the Second World War (Tiratsoo, 2004), were effectively diffused into a new domain of government. Likewise the ideal of a board comprising both skilled and experienced executives, as well as independent non – executive members, affirmed in numerous reports of the 1990s and 2000s (Cadbury, 1992; Hampel, 1998; Turnbull, 1999; Higgs, 2003) as attempts were made to restrain the excesses of executive directors in public limited companies during those years, was adapted to a new setting. Non - executives were enjoined to ‘support’ and ‘challenge’ their executive counterparts and to lead on matters of audit (Treasury, 2005). A work of ‘translation’ (Rose,1999) or a redeployment of practices of government from one domain to another is suggested here. But ‘New Labour’ drew inspiration from developments in the domain of corporate governance without simply following prescription. And this would be a permissive and flexible scheme of government, allowing departmental heads to fashion their own optimum arrangements.

### **Problematizing the boards**

In practice, progress towards the programmatic ideal for the boards was slow and faltering. After 2005, the requirement for effective strategic management in the departments became a central concept in a wider debate. Diverse reports, relying on expert investigation and analysis, opened the Civil Service up to scrutiny, comparison and judgement according to

a norm of strategy, placing questions of Civil Service governance and the organization of the boards at the heart of their analyses (Cabinet Office, 2006; Public Administration Select Committee, 2007; Parker et al, 2009; Parker et al, 2010). And much of the information and argument presented the management and governance of departments in a problematic light, falling well short of the norm.

Initially, there were the Capability Reviews. Launched by the Head of the Civil Service (Cabinet Office, 2006), between 2006 and 2009 twenty five reviews were conducted drawing on the expertise of representatives of business, the wider public sector as well as the Civil Service. Departments were to be examined in relation to their strategic planning, leadership and service delivery processes. The first group of reviews highlighted a set of common weaknesses. Departments, it was claimed, were deficient in finding ‘imaginative’ solutions in respect of the delivery of services and in developing skills (Cabinet Office, 2006). By 2009, though there were claims of widespread improvements in the strategic capabilities of departments, the reviewers identified continuing weaknesses in respect of skill development and the capability to transform departmental strategies into effective delivery (Cabinet Office, 2009). The offices of government remained in key respects unreformed and lacking in ‘strategic capability’. All of this, it was assumed, implied fresh challenges for the boards.

Similar concerns were at the heart of the investigations of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Public Administration (Public Administration Select Committee, 2007). All manner of perverse effects flowed from the absence of an effective ‘strategic centre’

(Public Administration Select Committee, 2007, p.3). In most instances, departments lacked adequate knowledge of the skills they required. Staff development initiatives were typically 'demand led' (Public Administration Select Committee, 2007, p.13) rather than guided by strategic considerations. Staff were moved too rapidly between positions with damaging effects on departmental capabilities. Above all, departmental leaders had failed to take responsibility in relation to the management of the 'poor performer' (Public Administration Select Committee, 2007, p.14).

Perhaps the most critical appraisal of the capabilities of departments emerged from the think tank the Institute for Government (Parker et al, 2009; Parker et al, 2010). Drawing on the Capability Reviews, internal surveys and the Institute's own research, the government of the boards was once again being called into question. The Civil Service, it was claimed, was suffering from a lack of 'effective strategic management' at all levels. Greater 'coherence' of thinking was required at the highest levels of policy making. At departmental level, the Institute argued, the symptoms of ineffective management were present everywhere: the failure of the majority of departments to achieve their targets, low levels of staff morale and confidence in leaders and boards, a perception of failure on the part of departmental leaders to address the problem of the 'poor performer'. What was now required was not only a clearer definition of roles but a strengthening of the board (Parker et al, 2010, p.61). If ministerial teams and boards could be brought together in a single 'strategic board' with specialists in finance involved in strategic decisions from the outset, the operation of departments would be enhanced (Parker et al, 2010, p.70) and the need for supervision and control from the centre reduced. To enhance their operation, greater

attention needed to be given to the competences of board members, to the enhancement of 'group dynamics' and 'behavioural awareness'. Effective boards would also give greater attention to their non – executives: to their recruitment, induction and development (Parker et al, 2010, p.71). And new powers should be conferred on the non – executive, so they might have some say in the performance assessment of the most senior officials.

### **Liberal Conservatism and the reinvention of the boards**

As Conservatives prepared their programmes for the management of the Civil Service during 2008 and 2009, arguments and critiques advanced during the early 2000s by the new think tanks of the time informed their analysis. There was praise for the customary knowledge of the bureaucrat, in the sceptical mode of the analysts of Policy Exchange. Conservatives, it was said, would 'listen to' and 'respect' the advice of their civil servants (Maude, 2009a). The civil servant would no longer be required to submit to the 'excessive' and 'distracting' target based regime of management favoured by 'New Labour'. The knowledge present in society and its autonomous institutions, including the great professions, should be recognised and released. Civil servants were to be agents of a new era of government subverting conventional norms of command and control in relation to the organisations of civil society and fostering their well – being (Conservative Party, 2008). They were to become 'civic servants', granted leave of absence for participating in such organisations and subject to appraisal in respect of the new civic norm.

What was also clear, however, was that Conservatives, like their opponents and the diverse expert voices we have been considering, had come to see the configuration of the

departmental board as a central target for action and intervention. Recent publications have highlighted the particular influence of the analyses and arguments of the Institute for Government, as the Conservatives prepared for office in 2009 and 2010 (Civil Service World, 2010). Certainly, the report 'It's Your Money' (Conservative Party, 2009) prepared by the Shadow Minister and the head of the Implementation Unit, preparing the Conservatives for government, emphasized the strengthening of the role of the finance specialist at the highest levels of strategy making in departments, recalling the recommendations of the Institute. Similarly, speeches during 2009 (Maude, 2009a; 2009b) took up other familiar themes: the problems of morale, the management of the 'poor performer' and the effective nurturing of expertise. And control, as the Conservatives saw it, should lie with newly strengthened departmental boards, chaired by relevant ministers, if these challenges were now to be addressed.

Yet Conservatives should not be viewed as merely following think tank 'blueprints' during these years. Crucially, the preeminent way of rationalising the case for 'modernisation' had acquired another inflection, reflecting changes in political strategy in the Conservative leadership in the autumn of 2008 (Bale, 2010). The interventions of authorities inside the Party, rather than the think tanks, were decisive here. In the context of economic recession and in the aftermath of the banking crisis, reform and enhanced efficiency were now judged to be essential in a new era of 'fiscal austerity'. The cause of national economic difficulties lay primarily in the costs of the State and the actions of a profligate and 'irresponsible' Government: the source of a burdensome deficit in the public finances (Conservative Party, 2009). In the period after 1997 'New Labour', it

was now claimed, had resorted to type: expanding the domain of the State, borrowing without regard for the consequences, presiding over inefficient practices and financing ‘extravagant’ schemes of rule (Conservative Party, 2009). Relying to a greater degree on the energy and wisdom of ‘civil society’ and private enterprise, would be a significant source of saving in its own right. Circumstances now also demanded emergency cost savings. Yet the primary problem was that of obtaining ‘more for less’ from the administrative machinery of the central State. In place of the ‘ineffective and costly’ schemes for the management of civil servants favoured by their opponents, Conservatives, it was argued, should aim for a new culture of self sustaining efficiency, engaging the active and willing support of civil servants. Current and future economic stability demanded change in the administrative machinery.

Reconfigured boards had thus become a matter of necessity, in a logic that brooked no argument. And, in the interests of frugal government, new ways of coding the activity of departmental board members were now explicitly prescribed (Maude, 2009a; 2009b). The technology of the ‘business plan’, initially a resource for presenting broad policy options to the electorate in respect of education (Haddon and Riddell, 2011), now became a resource in plans for the administration of the State. Henceforward, departmental boards would prepare business plans, defining priorities and key outcomes putting into effect the broad policy priorities of Government, within tight financial controls imposed by the Treasury. The new era would be one of ‘delegated authority’, involving a focus on outcomes rather than processes, a set of strategic boundaries within which individual civil servants could display their capacity for ‘inventiveness’ and professional discretion



(Maude, 2009b). For the first time full use would be made of key agents of expertise in the deliberations of the boards: that of the departmental financial manager and of the non executive member, now to be drawn predominantly from the business interest. He or she would now be a key agent supplying the necessary strategic expertise and with significant powers in respect of another key agent in the new management process: the Departmental Permanent Secretary. In effect this would mean the power to recommend dismissal to the Head of the Civil Service (Maude, 2009b) in the event of failure to implement his or her mandate.

Henceforward, there was to be a new ‘fiduciary responsibility’ to the taxpayer imposed on senior officials (Maude, 2009a). Notions of the ‘good citizen’ favoured by Conservatives in the 1980s and 1990s (Cooper, 1998) – the idea of the ‘citizen taxpayer’ – were thus taken up and put to new use. The imputation of common ‘taxpayer’ interest was now being used as a means of legitimising a particular notion of the public good: privileging cost efficiency and business like practices. ‘Post bureaucracy’, as the Conservatives saw it, required not only a new autonomy for civil servants, but an increasing level of transparency in the availability of information. Opening up to public and media scrutiny an array of new information, including the salaries of senior civil servants, all items of major spending, organisational structures and job descriptions, would impose its own subtle discipline on the activities of civil servants at all levels.

But if Conservatives were borrowing from think tanks and the other sources we have been considering, they were also adapting ideas and practices with a longer history. Key

elements in the Conservative schemes suggested an attempt to refine the familiar technologies of performance related pay (Marsden and French, 2002). Henceforward there would be financial performance targets for board members and additional rewards for those suggesting cost savings. The techniques of performance appraisal and the management of incentives would allow for the proper reward of efficiency, with departments able to demonstrate cost savings duly rewarded.

### **A 'conservative revival' ?**

As Conservatives developed their programmes of rule during the middle years of the first decade of the new millennium, certain commentators on the British left (Cruddas and Rutherford, 2007) reflected on what they saw as a new era of political creativity on the right. The sterility of the left, as they saw it, contrasted with Conservatives busy reinventing their own tradition. With the revival of sceptical modes of argumentation, arguments in favour of the customary wisdom of civil servants and images of a new civic service, it is not difficult to see how the developments we have been exploring might have been taken for a significant moment of conservative political inventiveness. Yet, as the preceding discussion has implied, to focus on a 'revival' of Burkean conservative discourse in the 2000s would be misleading. Such developments, we would argue, should be seen as of secondary significance in relation to another mode of political discourse, fundamentally managerial in orientation, that informed the interventions of Conservatives during these years.

During the years of 'New Labour', certain academics argued that the era of the 'new public management' had passed (Jones, 2001; Osborne, 2006). Political authorities, they said, now favoured methods of 'partnership' and enhanced 'flexibility' in the delivery of services. Yet, as we have seen, interest in the deployment of practices drawn from the domain of enterprise did not diminish during these years, even if political authorities sought to enrol new 'partners'. The developments we have been reviewing suggest a further moment of inventiveness in the deployment of practices borrowed from the domain of enterprise in the offices of the State. The 'new public management', as others have argued (Lapsley, 2008), is best viewed not as a constant or fixed doctrine but as a loose configuration of ideas and practices. It is open to differing interpretation, change and revision in the light of shifting political circumstances and operational requirements. 'New Labour' turned to the technology of the board to enhance 'delivery' and to correct what it took to be the overly narrow focus of the managerial innovations of the Thatcher and Major eras. In turn, liberal conservatives looked to modified departmental 'governance' arrangements in developing their scheme of rule, seeking to resolve what they portrayed as the excesses and perverse effects of the years of 'New Labour', as part of an effort to modernise management in the Civil Service.

There are parallels here, we would argue, with the earlier experience of the NPM under the Conservatives. Certainly, Conservative schemes in the new millennium exhibited a coherence of form uncharacteristic of the early years of the NPM in Britain (Hood, 1991). But during the 2000s, matters of efficiency became the preeminent concern of Conservatives just as they had been in the early years of the leadership of Margaret

Thatcher. Conservatives revisited the ideal of the 'citizen taxpayer' and the tactics of performance pay, revising and refining their favoured practices of government. Once again, the intellectual resources of think tanks played their part in conjunction with other political forces. The IEA with its objectives for the long term transformation of intellectual life (Cockett, 1995) can be differentiated from the more engaged and policy oriented practice of Policy Exchange or the Institute for Government. But in each instance, similar 'intellectual' force, 'dealers in ideas', removed from the domain of formal parliamentary politics, yet ultimately seeking to influence that domain by articulating the truth of political life, were involved.

We would also argue that the Conservative scheme of the new millennium suggests an array of costs and difficulties similar in kind to those associated with an earlier Conservative era of reform in the Civil Service (du Gay, 2000; Hood, 1991; Pollitt, 1993). The Conservative scheme of the new millennium sought to define the senior civil servant primarily as a manager and specifically as a strategic planner. Less an independent voice licensed to speak frankly to political authorities (du Gay, 2009), the senior civil servant was now to be encouraged to define himself or herself as an agent of the collective decision making processes of the board. And he or she was to be rewarded for the achievement of politically determined priorities. At issue here is the customary role of the senior civil servant in counselling a minister against unwise and short term policy measures, a type of frank speaking that could extend to reminding a minister of the requirement to deal openly and honestly with Parliament (Marquand, 2004). More generally, there is the question of the 'tradition' of impartiality and independence in the

Civil Service that has underpinned a particular parliamentary democratic regime. The Northcote Trevelyan report of 1853 fashioned a distinctive identity for the 'new senior class' (du Gay, 2009; Barratt, 2009). Senior civil servants were to advise, assist and 'to some extent influence those who are from time to time set over them' ( PP 1854, p.2 ). Practices of recruitment, development and promotion were to be overseen by an independent Civil Service Commission with the aim of nurturing the necessary virtues and intellectual capabilities. For all the talk of protecting custom, Conservative showed little concern for the potential consequences of their scheme for the idea of a politically impartial and independent Civil Service.

Conservatives in the 2000s imagined a distinctive configuration of relations between the subjects of the board. The 'non – executive' board member, political appointees working at the heart of the administration and drawn primarily from the business interest, would not only supply the necessary strategic guidance and know how but play a part in determining the fate of the senior civil servant. Civil servants unable to demonstrate the necessary commitment to political priorities would now be at risk of replacement on the recommendation of the 'non - executives'. Conservative reforms in this regard suggest an extension of the 'post democratic' characteristics of the NPM (Crouch, 2004), a further way of extending the direct influence of representatives of corporate interests, with their privileged knowledge, into the offices of government. And if the board truly was to hold collective responsibility for its decisions, the question of political accountability would inevitably arise. Contrary to accepted convention, a minister would no longer be accountable to Parliament for key decisions in his or her department (du Gay, 2000).

Those who claim to draw inspiration from the thought of Burke and Oakeshott appeared indifferent to the fundamental constitutional issues at stake in their chosen measures.

Conservatives promised a new era of 'freedom' in the working lives of individual civil servants. 'New Labour', it was argued, had acted illiberally. The subjects of the strategic management plans of the boards - individual civil servants - were to be licensed to act without the constraining process targets of 'New Labour', focusing on 'outcomes'. With the Conservatives, then, there was to be a new 'responsibilisation' of the civil servant at lower levels of the organisation. The ideal of 'government at a distance' (Rose, 1999) was thus taking another turn. But in effect, a weighty responsibility was to be assigned to civil servants: the 'problem' of finding ways to manage the deficit in the public finances. And with such delegation would appear to come certain risks. The proposed regime of empowerment and incentives would appear to offer much in the way of encouragement for the cutting of corners, a zealotry and lack of restraint in the performance of the work of the State. As critics of the earlier era of Conservative innovation in the Civil Service argued, a value system that 'licensed greed' nourishes the conditions of corruption and jobbery (Phillips, 1988; Doig, 1997). The Conservative scheme of the 2000s envisaged not only new forms of empowerment and incentives but a new era of competition in the Civil Service, involving additional opportunities for private enterprises, cooperatives and other 'civil society' organisations to compete over government contracts. Delegation would require an enhanced role for civil servants in the negotiation and management of contracts. Conservatives appeared unconcerned with the risks to the public in this state of

affairs, of the need for 'strategies' for the enhancement of probity and honest administration (Doig, 1997) in a decentralised regime.

Values of integrity and impartiality, customarily associated with the defence of the public interest, would seem to be at risk in the new disaggregated and incentivised regime of the Conservative 'modernizers'. Under 'New Labour' ministers merely monitored and oversaw the work of departmental boards. By contrast, the Conservatives of the new millennium sought to bring ministers to the centre of departmental management, leading their boards. But as the powers of ministers in respect of their departments were to be framed in strategic managerial terms, so the political control of departments would seem to be effectively weakened. As in the operation of the boards, delegation could all too easily be used as a device by ministers for reallocating responsibility to others in the event of failure (du Gay, 2000).

The single minded pursuit of frugal government in the years of the Thatcher and Major governments was associated with a notable decline in morale in the Civil Service (Hennessy, 1989). The pursuit of economy encouraged an array of responses at this time. The growing use of 'casual workers', 'downsizing' and the intensification of work became part of the everyday experience of the civil servant (Fairbrother, 1994). Civil servants came to appreciate that whilst expected to contribute more in the way of effort, they should expect much less from their employer in return (Driscoll and Morris, 2001; Fairbrother, 1994; Foster and Hoggett, 1999). They learnt also that freed from bureaucratic 'constraints' and empowered with responsibility for the management of performance and rewards, their

managers were all too commonly inclined to act in arbitrary ways (Marsden and French, 2002). The divisive and ineffective nature of target based regimes became all too familiar. The phenomenon of 'targetology' was discovered during these years: the tendency for target based systems to focus on more readily measurable outcomes (Rouse, 1993). Users of such systems were inclined to 'gaming' (Pollitt, 1989), to outright distortion in the reporting of outcomes. If Conservative schemes underscored the ideal of enriching the working lives of civil servants alongside the promotion of enhanced efficiency in the offices of government, the experience of an earlier era of Conservative rule in the Civil Service suggested the profound difficulties associated with any project of this kind.

Conservatives, then, showed little inclination to reflect critically on or learn from experience. Suggesting a further dilution of accountability in the Civil Service, a bureaucracy more 'self interested', politically partial and potentially less effective in its working, our evaluation of the Conservatives' scheme for the government of civil servants appears to raise a number of fundamental and familiar problems. And ultimately, just as critics of an earlier era of management reform argued (Marquand, 2004; Crouch, 2004), there is a question of public confidence in the political process at stake in this scheme. Trust in the operation of government and the central administrative apparatus, as David Marquand (2004) has argued, is a precondition of such forms of citizen participation as the British version of parliamentary democracy allows. Without such trust, democratic citizenship - already weakened (Marquand, 2004) - must atrophy still further. Conservatives appeared indifferent to such potentially profound ramifications of their scheme.



## **Conclusion**

Stuart Hall (2011) has recently suggested that the leadership of the contemporary Conservative party is the best prepared and most radical of the political regimes which since the 1970's have been maturing the neo – liberal project in Britain. Our particular example of the emergence of the technology of the board as a key target for action and intervention during the early years of the new millennium appears consistent with Hall's general claim for the preparedness of the Conservatives. We would differ from him however in emphasizing the complexity of the processes by which this scheme took shape. Deriving from abstract political arguments and the development of more specific programmes and technologies of rule, we have emphasized the role of a dispersed array of governmental authorities and forces in the fashioning of a distinctive rationality of government and a particular technology of power.

Though we have sought to avoid abstract and general characterisation of 'neo – liberal' rule, our example of the boards of the Civil service would endorse Hall's claim for the continuing dominance of this logic. The domain of 'enterprise' was not only to be protected to the utmost from the burdens of the State but also, through plans for the deployment of the technology of the board, 'enterprise' became an essential source for refashioning the organisation of the offices of government and the norms of behaviour which were to apply to it. The boards of departments became a key device for addressing an array of political and economic problems. Yet we have also tried to capture the hybrid nature of this particular governmental scheme. Arguments with a conservative lineage stand in a secondary or subordinate relationship to a managerialist and ultimately neo

liberal logic. Conservatives returned to sceptical and Burkean lines of argument to fashion a critique of the regime of targets, central monitoring and audit in the Civil Service. They praised the customs of the Civil Service, imagining a newly moralised civil servant. Yet, from the outset, the aim was to encourage a new era of ‘modern management’ in the Civil Service. Ultimately, there was an affirmation of the salience of technologies borrowed from the domain of the business enterprise. Liberal conservatives celebrated principles of enterprise in a way that sat uncomfortably with the sceptical, self critical and provisional elements in conservative discourse. Were they to have reflected in this way, we have suggested, they would have found serious grounds for concern in their preferred scheme for the government of civil servants.

We have stopped short of examining the moment of implementation of the Conservative scheme for the boards. There is, of course, always the possibility that their scheme of rule might ultimately prove to be of little consequence, running aground, for example, on resistance or practical difficulties encountered by the non executives (Ferlie et al, 1996). Administration and ‘strategy’ might, in practice, proceed without the influence of the board. Here, exploring the emergence of the board as a technology of government and the rationality of government to which it is connected, we have highlighted an array of potential costs, taking the Conservatives and their plans for government seriously. We would argue that Conservatives showed little inclination to reflect critically on or learn from the errors of the recent past. In so far as the Conservative scheme appears to diminish political accountability and to promote a more ‘self interested’ and politically

partial administration, we have suggested that ultimately it is parliamentary democracy itself that can be seen to be at risk in these developments.

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