

POLICY BRIEF

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Bureaucracy and Development: Insights and Reflections of a British Civil Servant

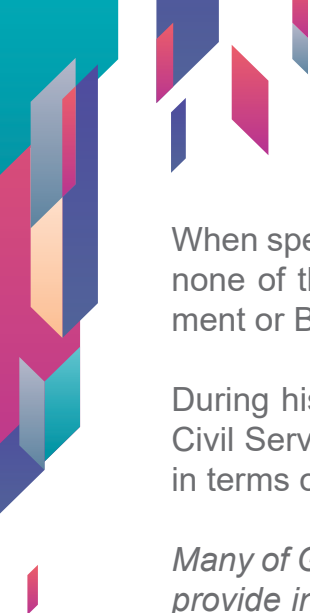
Graham Duncan

Introduction

Institutions of civil service or public administration have a significant impact on a country's development. The bureaucracy acts as the main facilitator in implementing policies and ensuring that public service delivery occurs in a smooth and effective fashion. The bureaucracy's primary responsibility also involves ensuring that as elected officials change, and governments transition from one political party to the next, governance structures remain stable, consistent and responsive to public needs. In essence, the civil service must therefore ensure that its functionality is built on principles of people-centricity, efficiency and stability. Moreover, the bureaucracy must be innovative and dynamic—able to adapt to changing socio-political, environmental and technological changes.

As part of its seminar series, CPPG invited Mr. Graham Duncan to share his reflections and experiences about the role of the civil service in public service delivery and advancing a country's development agenda. Graham Duncan worked in the British civil service from 1981 to 2022, and was a member of the Senior Civil Service in the UK from 2005 to 2022. Beginning his career in the Ministry of Defence, Graham moved to the Department of the Environment, where he worked in a range of roles, advising Ministers on policy relating to housing, the environment, the water industry, local government and regeneration. He has been Leader of Hackney Inner City Task Force, leading a public, private and voluntary sector team based in one of London's poorest areas, seeking to revive the area through better education, employment and business opportunities. He has been Deputy Director for Strategy, Revenue and Capital in the Local Government Finance Directorate of the Department for Communities and Local Government; Head of Affordable Housing Regulation and Investment; and Deputy Director for Care and Reform in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Throughout his career, Graham has been interested in how to translate Ministerial policy plans into action; how Government works best with local agencies, empowering local communities and harnessing their energy and skills; and how best to fund public services in a way which provides value for money for the taxpayer. The foundations for this career were built in Pakistan, where Graham was born and spent much of his childhood. He was educated initially in Sialkot and then at Murree Christian School. His experience of growing up in Pakistan has given him a lifelong loyalty to, and affection for, the country of Pakistan and its people.





When speaking, Graham emphasised that he was talking in a personal capacity and that none of the views he expressed necessarily reflected the views of the British Government or British civil service.

During his lecture, Graham spoke about his career as a public servant with the British Civil Service, his career lessons, and his observations on what works and what doesn't in terms of effective public service delivery.

Many of Graham's experiences have transferrable lessons for other bureaucrats and can provide interesting comparisons for civil service institutions globally, including Pakistan. This policy brief summarises the main talking points of Graham's lecture and acts as a reference document for an analysis of the relationship between the bureaucracy, the political leadership and a country's development trajectory.

The Role of a Civil Servant in a Country's Welfare

While there may be practical motivations behind joining the civil service, the leading ideology should be to serve one's fellow countrymen and women (and children) and to work towards making the country a better place for people to live and work.


How do we do that, and what is the role of a civil servant?

Graham suggested that the insights of Sir Oliver Letwin, a distinguished British politician, about the role of the civil service were particularly helpful. Sir Oliver was a political adviser to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and in 1997, he became a Member of Parliament and was the Minister in charge of overseeing Government policy in Prime Minister David Cameron's government. He thought hard about public policy, was interested in evidence as the basis for policy making, and was, in Graham's view, very good at cutting through to the key points of an issue.

Graham referred to a specific talk which Sir Oliver gave some years ago about the role of the 'Whitehall civil servant' (those in the UK civil service who work in departmental headquarters and advise Government Ministers). Sir Oliver argued, among other things, that civil servants are an essential "transmission mechanism". When Ministers make decisions, there needs to be someone who makes sure those decisions are recorded, conveyed to those who need to act on them and are translated into action. Without this transmission mechanism, even the most capable elected politicians will be ineffective.

The Relationship between Ministers and Civil Servants

During the 1980s, there was a very popular TV comedy series in the UK called 'Yes Minister'. The show is all about the relationship between Government Ministers and their bureaucratic advisers. While the show is a good example of comedy, it is not a good guide to how Government should work, since it shows Ministers and their civil servants trying to trick each other, and win their arguments through underhand means. It represents civil



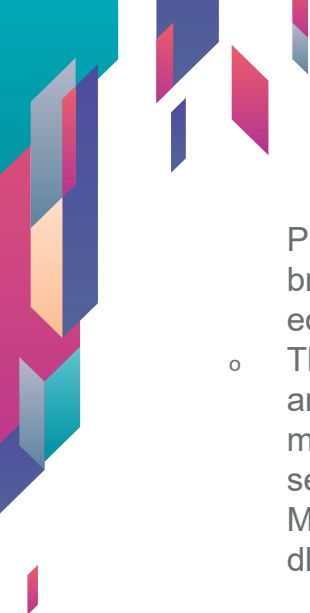
servants as people who say one thing and mean another, who used complicated language to confuse their Ministers, and who do not do what they are told by the politicians.

In reality, the role of a civil servant is to advise Ministers on how to implement their policy ambitions, to provide the Minister with options for doing so, and then to make sure the Minister's decisions are implemented. They need to learn to adapt to changing Ministers and find the best way of translating Ministers' decisions into actionable programs.

Graham reflected on the process of reforming the British civil service over the past 40 years. While the process of reform has been long and the British Civil Service still has a lot to improve on, the institution has sought to take practical steps to modernize itself, to ensure that it remains effective and responsive to the wishes of different political parties in government. The aim is to ensure a Service that works for the 'Government of the day', regardless of personal political affiliations which individual civil servants may have, and is able to ensure policy implementation in a smooth, uninterrupted manner.

Working with a number of Government Ministers in Britain, as one of their personal aides in the Minister's 'private office', Graham learnt a variety of things that should characterize the relationship between Ministers and civil servants:

- Civil servants are required to be impartial. That means they need to be able to work for whoever is in government, regardless of their own opinions. It also means that they work for the 'government of the day', They should implement their manifestos and policies with equal commitment considering that each government will have its own set of priorities. A civil servant who has different political preferences needs to set them aside when working for the Government. Therefore, serving in a non-partisan way and with neutrality should be a guiding principle.
- Similarly, politicians need to have confidence that their civil servants are trying their best to support them and implement their policies. Civil servants advise, politicians decide and civil servants make sure their decisions are implemented.
- Despite the understanding that civil servants must serve the government in office, there are boundaries to that allegiance in the UK. Ideally, one never gets into a situation where you encounter one of those boundaries, but they do exist, and can come into play. Successive British governments have adhered to three important codes: the Ministerial Code; the Civil Service Code; and 'Managing Public Money':
 - The Ministerial Code; (www.gov.uk) governs the conduct of Ministers. One of the rules in the code is that, if a Minister knowingly misleads Parliament, they should resign as a Minister. It is a mechanism of accountability that can work effectively and has been applied in the past. Ministers have resigned in the past where they have been deemed to have broken the Code. Graham mentioned that a previous



Prime Minister, Boris Johnson was currently under investigation as to whether he broke the Ministerial Code. The question under consideration is over his knowledge about breaking Covid rules by his staff.

- The Civil Service Code; (www.gov.uk) sets out core values which civil servants are expected to adhere to: honesty; integrity; objectivity; and impartiality. It makes clear that civil servants must not misuse their position to benefit themselves, and must use public money wisely.

Managing Public Money; (www.gov.uk) then goes into more detail about the handling of public money in a way which ensures propriety and value for money.


- If a Minister intended to deliberately mislead Parliament, their civil service advisers would be expected to advise them not to do so—fulfilling their responsibility of counselling politicians.
- If a Minister proposed to use public funds improperly, the civil servant would be expected to challenge that, and if the Minister persisted, to report it to seniors.
- Each Permanent Secretary – the civil servant in charge of a government department – is also its Accounting Officer. In that capacity, he or she is accountable to Parliament for ensuring the sound use of public money – including propriety and value for money.
- The Direction-making power. If an Accounting Officer concludes that a Minister’s proposed use of public money is not proper or value for money, they can insist that the Minister issues them with a written Direction to implement the decision. That written letter is copied to Parliament’s Public Accounts Committee and posted on the UK Government website.

Human Resources in the Civil Service: Specialists or Generalists?

The British civil service and the Pakistani civil service have a common historical heritage. Their history in both cases is hugely influenced by the civil service reforms of the British Government in the mid-nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, the two systems are probably grappling with many of the same problems, as they seek to update the civil service frameworks which originated in the nineteenth century.

One of the central issues that our historical heritage poses is whether we should continue with the ‘generalist’ approach to civil service, or place great emphasis on professional specialisms. In other words, ‘specialists or generalists?’

One can develop an understanding by looking back at the history of this debate in the UK. In 1854, the Northcote/Trevelyan reforms took place. The then UK Chancellor (Finance Minister) William Gladstone commissioned a review of the civil service by Charles Trevelyan, the Permanent Secretary at the Treasury and Stafford Northcote, a former civil servant at the Board of Trade. Their reforms have been described by British constitutional historian Peter Hennessey as “the greatest single governing gift of the nineteenth to the twentieth century”. The key elements were recruitment and promotion of officers on merit; safeguarding core values of integrity, propriety, objectivity; and promoting politi-



cal impartiality (the civil service should be able to transfer its loyalty and expertise from one elected government to the next).

The following century witnessed an expansion of, and changes to the nature of, government. In 1968, the Fulton report, commissioned by Prime Minister Harold Wilson from a team led by academic John Fulton, addressed the ‘cult of the amateur’ (the idea that bright, generalist civil servants could do anything). Changes that flowed from that report and its successors in Britain included:

1. Scrapping the distinction between administrative and executive classes of civil servant.
2. Greater emphasis on professionalism; departmental Finance Directors, HR Directors etc. must be qualified in their chosen professional discipline; fast-streams for analysts, project management, operational delivery, science etc. should be adopted, not just policy civil servants.
3. Greater focus on people and their management skills, not just policy expertise.
4. Separating out operational delivery from political direction. The UK Government currently has:
 - 23 Ministerial departments
 - 20 Non-Ministerial departments: e.g. HM Revenue and Customs, the Food Standards Agency, Competition and Markets Authority or Forestry Commission; and regulators such as Ofgem and Ofsted
 - 38 Executive Agencies: e.g. the Prison and Probation Service; the UK Health Security Agency; the Drive and Vehicle Licensing Agency; the Met Office
 - A variety of other non-departmental public bodies: e.g. Judicial Appointments Commission; NHS; Office for Budget Responsibility; National Highways.

These are designed to give operational freedom to professional public service operational leaders.

5. Greater emphasis on project management and operational delivery. The Major Projects Authority (which acts as a check on the deliverability of major projects) and Major Projects Leadership Academy

While these reforms have taken place over decades, the challenges are still not completely solved. For instance, in Graham’s view, performing well in front of Ministers and having a sharp policy and political brain, can still help you get to the top even if you have inadequate people management skills. In his view, there is still a role for generalists, but it is better to think of them as policy professionals. They can offer flexibility, adaptability, versatility; intellectual challenge; political insight; strategic vision; and an ability to assimilate large amounts of material and make sense of them. But in an era when Government is about delivering public services to tens of millions of people, it is almost more important to have people who are highly trained project managers, skilled at introducing and running major projects and programmes. In the UK, there has been a steady professionalisation of the civil service. We need highly trained finance professionals, human



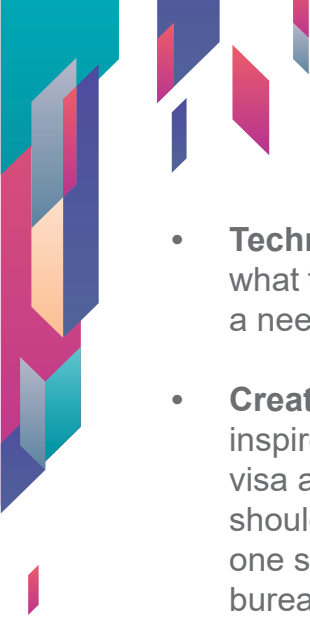
resources professionals, economists, engineers etc. and one of the mantras to be followed is ‘think about delivery when you design policy’. So while generalists continue to have a role, specialists are crucial in helping to achieve knowledge-specific objectives.

Driving Efficiency and Innovation

One of the key issues facing any Government and civil service is how to improve public service delivery, and how the country’s administration operates. According to Graham, this is about constantly seeking more efficient and effective ways to do things, and being innovative lies at the core of these objectives.

We live in an increasingly rapidly changing world, so even if we thought our ways of doing things worked perfectly yesterday, that doesn’t mean they still work perfectly today—because the world has changed. And of course, we never did things perfectly yesterday. Therefore, it is increasingly important to be agile and nimble in changing how things operate. Here are some thoughts on how to improve efficiency and promote innovation:

- **Paying attention to the detail of processes, and painstakingly working out how to improve them can often make the biggest differences.** Process engineering’ (mapping each component of a process, and analysing how to improve and streamline them) is still an under-used approach in the public service in Britain.. He considered that a good example of paying attention to detail is gov.uk, the UK Government’s online portal for public services. A lot has been invested in gov.uk to make it easier for people to do things online from their homes. That has involved careful thought in the detail of how each online process works, to make it easy and understandable to the user.
- **Understanding the needs of the customer** – like the best private sector firms do – is central. That involves asking people who use services how they could work best, and involving them in the design of policy and processes, rather than assuming that the bureaucrat knows best. A civil servant’s job is to serve the people. Ensuring the bureaucracy is people-centric requires consistent attention to that objective.
- **Incentivise efficiency and innovation** – examples of this in the UK include:
 - Requiring everyone to have an efficiency objective in their annual job objectives, and needing to provide evidence to their boss about how that has been achieved, at their annual staff performance review;
 - Including questions about the extent to which managers are open to innovative suggestions in the annual Civil Service Staff Survey, on which Permanent Secretaries are assessed;
 - Having high profile Civil Service Awards for individuals or teams who have done great things to improve services and make them more efficient.

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- **Technology can make a huge difference.** However, you need people who know what they are doing. Gov.UK has involved a huge shift of services online yet there is a need to cater to those who do not have access to mobile phones.
 - **Create a culture that prizes efficiency and innovation** – showcase examples, to inspire people. Graham for instance, was impressed by the Pakistani online tourist visa application process, which can be advertised as a success story. A civil servant should be a champion of doing things better and promoting the idea that in doing so, one saves money, helps people lead better lives, and improves the reputation of the bureaucracy among citizens!


How can the Civil Service Manage Unpredictable Disasters? Learning from the COVID-19 experience

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a big challenge to established ways of doing things. In Graham's view, it highlighted the limitations of relying on the 'gifted generalist' to turn their hand to anything. We need generalists, but some policy civil servants ended up doing things where their lack of operational experience showed them up.

Heading a division with responsibility for adult social care policy, Graham found that the division had to make wholesale changes when Covid hit: for instance, expansion in staffing to deal with the crisis; daily ministerial meetings; intensive liaison between government departments; servicing the action points from daily meetings; getting data in place; and being clear on who did what.

In the UK, there will be an independent public inquiry into the handling of the Covid emergency, which will indicate what worked and what did not. Without wishing to pre-empt that, Graham made several observations from his own experience:

1. The importance of involving stakeholders in decision-making in an emergency cannot be ignored. The stakeholder process for adult social care during the Covid pandemic worked well because someone who had hands-on experience of commissioning services at a local level, and who was trusted by commissioners and service providers, headed it.
2. Close working relations between the central government and local authorities, who could make things happen on the ground, led to results. Frank and open weekly meetings with selected local authority chief executives - and, separately, local authority finance directors - helped to build trust, and allowed confidential conversations to happen, including very rapid feedback on actions that were being planned.
3. The national infrastructure for social care had to be rapidly expanded to cope with the decisions required during the pandemic.
4. The power of accurate data and science was very apparent. Actions included wastewater monitoring for disease.

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5. What is appropriate in an emergency is not necessarily still appropriate later (e.g. Covid restrictions, suspending due process/legislation).

There are lessons to be learnt from the way the British Government handled the emergency of the pandemic – some positive but also some which are about how to do things better next time. The public inquiry will play a central role in identifying those lessons.

Conclusion

Creating a civil service that is responsive to the needs of the people, is effective and is accountable and demands constant reform and change. A dynamic public administration arena requires civil servants that are also able to adapt to changing circumstances. Lessons from the experience of a British civil servant indicate that many career objectives and responsibilities overlap with bureaucracies across the globe. Not only is the civil service as an institution responsible for ensuring a smooth transition of power between governments, its job is also to ensure that the public continues to receive services uninterrupted, efficiently and equitably. This entails the proper use of public finances, adopting a culture of innovation and persistent efforts towards finding better solutions.

A lot of these efforts must be led by the policymakers themselves, who demonstrate a commitment towards merit-based recruitment and training and who ensure that the bureaucracy and their ministerial counterpart's function together harmoniously. Conversely, as advisors and counsels to politicians, civil servants must uphold values of integrity, honesty and hard work. Additionally, their role requires impartiality so that the primary goal of safeguarding and expanding people's welfare can be achieved.

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ABOUT CPPG

The Centre for Public Policy and Governance is committed to promote and disseminate teaching and research on public policy that focus on citizen welfare, distributive justice and participative development, humane governance and consultative and transparent policy processes.

The Centre aims to nurture a new generation of Pakistani scholars and policy analysts as well as contributing towards training and skill development of public officials and managers from Pakistan and abroad. To fulfil these objectives, the Centre actively pursues its activities in three key domains:

- As an academic institution, it imparts quality education based on an innovative curriculum designed with domestic needs in mind.
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- As a training institute, it devises and conducts short term skills oriented trainings for public sector professionals.

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