Public Administration

The Royal Institute of Public Administration

Published by Basil Blackwell for

Vol. 64 Number 4
Winter 1986
them on the Cabinet agenda. What makes Peter Hennessy's book so much part of the present-day problems of 'overload' is its acceptance of the belief that better decisions can be taken if there are improvements in the calibre of the personnel and in the analysis of the data they receive, without reference to the context of the agenda or the line of command. He claims (p. 196) that few ministers perceive a serious problem with the system: he quoted Lord Heath of Wainewright (p. 190): 'there is a problem and we have not entirely solved it yet'. Much of the material he brings together comes from the recently expressed diatribe of retired permanent secretaries 'who reel for boards as never before' (p. 388) or who 'seem covered' (p. 389). He elucidates in turn of phrase which are designed as much to attract attention as to explain, like those of Sir John Holmes (pp. 186–187) who is on stage with similar prescriptions. There is some danger that talking to Peter Hennessy reinforces the formulations of a problem that will continue to suggest unsolving solutions. His studied irreverence has become almost a catchword; it occasionally slips into the royal 'we' (e.g. p. 386 picked up in our lecture room vacuum cleaner'). He does not always put the questions that allow the most illuminating replies, because he has got his own pet formula to repeat (e.g. the interviews with Sir Frank Cooper and David Howell, pp. 167 and 170). While those with experience in the stadium (p. 191) solve the problems of Cabinet government within the limitations of the 'overload' hypothesis, the very way in which Cabinet resolves the controversial issues might well be destroying other institutions of major significance. It is still important to enquire why the principal actors do not raise any fundamental questions about what is happening outside the Cabinet arena.

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WHITEHALL: TRAGEDY AND TARCE
Clive Ponting

The Cabinet of the Decline and Fall of the English Empire will put Ponting's account of as a futile administrative system. His book should not be written off as the personal spleen of a disgruntled ex-civil servant. But a tragedy, according to Nigel, is a conflict between 'right' and 'wrong'. In fact, the action produces unintended but comic outcomes. On these literal interpretations Ponting's account of Whitehall is mistitled since most of his well-told case-studies are in fact conflicts between right and wrong, and reveal actors deliberately producing perfunctory rather than unintended comic outcomes.

Ponting is familiar with the memoirs and diaries of recent political and administrative elites, modern historical scholarship, and some academic public administration. In consequence, his book is the best from recent ex-civil servants. It is an excellent resumé of conventional criticism of Whitehall's civil service administration. The perfume claims that he attempts to sell, for the first time, what really goes on in the 'corridor of power'. This hype is nonsense but it is no reason not to read on. Chapter 1 assumes that the political class is of low calibre and obsessed with the short-run, and that an amateur civil service, highly skilled in writing elegant English designed to conceal problems, complicates matters. Incidentally his book shows little elegant English amongst the elite. (The upper-middle-class habit of conjugating Latin and Sanskrit). Their primitive administrative and the often crude trading between pressure groups is described as shocking, but his descriptions are now conventional academic and popular wisdom. Chapter 2, Ministers, tells us that these chiefs (and the odd 'special') are impregnated for power, and are overworked in an archaic structure which they get to the top. The ubiquity of decision-taking in ignorance affected by choice, ending in base bargains, pettiness, and jobs and honours (mainly) for the boys and (also) Ponting. He warns historians that most

memories by politicians are bland and dissembling and relies heavily on Castle and Crossman's diaries to the 'only even remotely honest accounts of political life'. Ministers inhabit a 'seedy world of half-truth, ignorance and hatched decision-making'. Chapter 5, Mandarins, is equally generous. The civil service is a site and its origins are correctly traced to Gladstone's desire 'to strengthen and multiply the ties between the higher classes and the profession of administrative power'. Ponting has no doubt that the administrative class served Gladstone's purpose. The bias in recruitment is clear in outcome, but Ponting does not satisfactorily explain the process through which it occurs. But he does help put to paid to this book's myth of widespread inter-departmental circulation amongst the administrative class; only the Prime Minister is now circulate, and then mainly at the end of their careers when they may become permanent secretaries to departments they have never worked in. Ponting lists some notorious consequences of civil service amnesia. He illustrates the public school-boy infantility of the administrative elite, from its infatuation with cricketing metaphors to its complacency that their world has evolved to near perfection. Thus a Treasury official claimed in 1973 that the system of public expenditure control was probably superior to that found anywhere else in the world (p. 138). This constraint is not particularly revealing about the civil service. The civil service elite regularly uses is probably superior to that found anywhere else in the world, whether is the monarchy, the police force, or the judiciary and ministerial services which are the envy of the world.

Chapter 7 confirms that departments are frequently captive by their clientele, and shows that Ponting is no disciple of 'passionate mutual adjustment'. He thinks there is not a figure in the centre of government: that Cabinet policy-making is directive, that automatic reorganizations display no managerial logic; and the QCs are stuffed on the 'principle of jobs for good chap'. Chapter 6, Secrecy, Propaganda and Accountability, explains that Britain is the least liberal and least democratic of the major liberal democracies. The accountability mechanisms appropriate for an agrarian oligarchy managing imperial exploitation are ill-adapted to democracy. Chapter 6 promises to take us 'Behind the Scenes', but readers of Public Administration will be familiar with the folly of pre-Fallander diplomacy, the Crown Agents' financial advisors, and Cabinet ministers talking as paid-up members of Oxfam's United. However, Ponting's account of the difficulties with the SDUC and the Defence school of music is of worthy of a Yes Minister episode.

Critics of Whitehall know that its son strength is its capacity to resist reform. Chapter 7, 'Whitehall Defeats the Critics', catalogues the emasculation of the Fulton Report, the defeat of freedom of information proposals, and suggests that even Thatcher's efficiency drives are running into the absorbent of Whitehall inertia. But, Thatcher's Government has reduced the civil service of civil servants even it has not noticeably increased their efficiency.

Chapter 8, 'Transforming Whitehall', is Ponting's What is to be done? He has five remedies: freedom of information; a Swedish structure for central government which separates policy-making staffs from autonomous administrative boards, the politicization of policy-making staffs, a code of ethics better than Sir Robert Armstrong's, and finally, the development of a vocationsally-specialized, professional civil service. Ponting's prescriptions should be adopted without the professor's shrug.

If he is right, the administrative elite who read his book will dismiss him as an 'unstudied chap, lacking business', and a poor poet. Ponting is a sound mind, kicks away at bottoms where it hurts, and is an enjoyable read precisely because he is not a gadfly. Students can be justified to the civil service through his racy and well-capitalized account of Whitehall. Provided it is published in paperback, indexed and regularly updated, his book will be good teaching material.

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