

Winter 1986

Vol 64 Number 4

Decision-making in central and local government in the absence of political majority
Robin Wendt

The dilemmas of inner city policy
William Solesbury

Paying for local government: charging for services
Stephen James Bailey

Developing state audit in Britain
John Garrett

The principle of voluntary agreement
Robert E. Goodin

Public Administration

PUBLISHED BY BASIL BLACKWELL FOR
THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

them on the Cabinet agenda'. What makes Peter Hennessy's book so much part of the perceived problem 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 content 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 Hunt of Tanworth (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 disquiet of retired permanent secretaries 'who trod the boards as never before' (p. 188) or who 'broke cover' (p. 189). He delights in turns of phrase which are designed as much to attract attention as to explain, like those of Sir John Hoskyns (pp. 186-7) 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 unsatisfying solutions. His studied irreverence has become almost a national institution; he occasionally slips into the royal 'we' (e.g. p. 186 'picked up in our lecture room vacuum cleaner'). He does not always put the questions that elicit 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 ringside seats 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.

J. M. Lee
University of Bristol

WHITEHALL: TRAGEDY AND FARCE

Clive Ponting

Hamish Hamilton, 1986. 256pp. £9.95.

The Gibbon of the *Decline and Fall of the English Empire* will relish Ponting's account of a senile administrative system. His book should not be written off as the personal spleen of a disgruntled ex-civil servant. But a tragedy, according to Hegel, is a conflict between 'right' and 'right'. In a farce, the actors produce 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 wrong and wrong, and reveal actors deliberately producing pathetic rather than unintended comic outcomes.

Ponting is familiar with the memoirs and diaries of recent political and administrative élites, 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 British central administration. The preface claims that he 'attempts to tell, for the first time, what really goes on in the "corridors of power"'. This 'hype' is nonsense but is no reason not to read on.

Chapter 1 asserts 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' compounds matters. (Incidentally his book shows little elegant English amongst the élite, just the upper middle-class habit of confusing Latin with elegance). Their pervasive departmentalism 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 chaps (and the odd chapes) are unprepared for power, and are overworked in an archaic structure when they get to the top. The ubiquity of decision-taking in ignorance, affected by chance, ending in base bargain, pettiness, and jobs and honours (mainly) for the boys scandalizes Ponting. He warns historians that most

memoirs by politicians are bland and dissembling and relies heavily on Castle and Crossman's diaries as the 'only even remotely honest accounts of political life'. Ministers inhabit 'a seedy world of half-truth, ignorance and botched decision-making'.

Chapter 3, 'Mandarins', is equally generous. The civil service is a caste and its origins are correctly traced to Gladstone's desire 'to strengthen and multiply the ties between the higher classes and the possession 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 paid to the textbook myth of widespread inter-departmental circulation amongst the administrative class: only the *crème de la crème* circulate, and then mostly 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 amateurism. He illustrates the public school-boy infantilism of the administrative élite, from its infatuation with cricketering 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. 119). This comment is not particularly revealing about the civil service. The English élite regularly utter 'x is probably superior to that found anywhere else in the world', whether x be the banana monarchy, the police force, or the judiciary and intelligence services which are 'the envy of the world'.

Chapter 4 confirms that departments are frequently captured by their clientele, and shows that Ponting is no disciple of 'partisan mutual adjustment'. He thinks there is a 'hole in the centre of government'; that Cabinet policy-making is defective, that administrative re-organizations display no managerial logic, and that QGAs are staffed on the 'principle' of jobs for good chaps. Chapter 5, '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-Falklands diplomacy, the Crown Agents' financial adroitness, and Cabinet ministers talking as paid-up members of Duffers' United. However, Ponting's account of his difficulties with the MOD and the Defence school of music is worthy of a *Yes, Minister* episode.

Critics of Whitehall know that its sole strength is its capacity to resist reform, and 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 liberties of civil servants even if 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 vocationally-specialized, professional civil service. Ponting's prescriptions should be required reading on the opposition benches.

If he is right, the administrative élite who read his book will dismiss him as an unsound chap, lacking 'bottom', and a poor sport. Ponting is of sound mind, kicks pompous bottoms where it hurts, and is an enjoyable read precisely because he is not a gentleman. Students can be introduced to the civil service through his racy and well-organized account of Whitehall. Provided it is published in paperback, indexed and regularly updated, his book will be good teaching material.

Brendan O'Leary
London School of Economics