

## The politics of expertise and public sector leadership in post-war Britain

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- History and institutional memory are important sources of intelligence for public sector leaders, including in times of crisis
- After the Second World War, public sector leaders in Britain have been expected to be flexible generalists, informed specialists and efficient managers, to varying degrees.
- The modern public sector is complex; both leaders and citizens need 'tools to think with' –historians and other experts can help sharpen them

### Background

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Rising demand, higher expectations, new realities: the call for reform in the public sector is as old as public services themselves. It tends to be accompanied by reviews of public sector leadership: what skills and qualities do leaders need to meet the challenges of the present?

Except that public sector leadership today isn't as radically different as we may think – because our 'complex, uncertain and volatile world' isn't itself completely new.

Trends in public sector leadership have always been shaped by the wider context: pressures for reform, political agendas, perspectives of service users and professionals. In post-war Britain, public sector leaders have been asked to be

well-rounded generalists, technocratic experts and delivery-focused managers, among other things. Reflecting on historical debates about what makes a good leader provides some insights on the way forward.

### Britain's 'technocratic moment'

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In the immediate post-war decades, debates over public sector leadership inevitably reflected the demands of national recovery. The role of the state was vastly extended in this period, encompassing nationalised industries and directly-managed public services – including the new NHS. The main political parties were in broad consensus on national priorities and embraced the 1942 Beveridge Report's vision of social insurance 'from the cradle to the grave'.

But were public leaders up to the task of running the activist state? As anxieties about British decline emerged from the late 1950s, this question became pressing. A prominent target was the generalist official, unequal to the demands of modern government. The 1968 Fulton Report recommended each government department form a policy-planning unit: a dynamic mix of external experts and talented officials, serving on secondments and short-term contracts.

This plan was never fully realised and the role of expertise in policy has remained a live, sometimes contentious, issue. The dictum 'experts should be on tap but not on top' (often attributed to Churchill) retains its appeal in debates about public sector leadership. But it fails to address *how* those on top should reconcile

specialist advice with the many other, potentially conflicting, factors involved – a problem that resurfaced in later decades.

### **A new consensus: consumer choice, market discipline**

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The Thatcher revolution radically remodelled conceptions of public sector leadership. Thatcher favoured efficiency, effective contract management, and importing practices from business over direct delivery and central planning. This ideology reshaped the political landscape and had several implications for public sector leadership.

First, Thatcher's government relied less on experts and bureaucrats and more on political advisers and think-tanks. Along with a new lobbying industry, these politicised perspectives crowded the policy advice arena and undermined the influence of specialists. Despite a renewed focus on expertise – branded as 'evidence-based policymaking' – Blair's administrations embraced this approach, expanding the use of political advisers in government. For leaders, the challenge was to make sense of and manage multiple agendas.

Second, the public sector was asked to adopt a more entrepreneurial, consumer-focused style of leadership, frequently termed New Public Management. The activist state was incrementally dismantled by outsourcing services to the private or third sectors; around three-quarters of Whitehall staff were transferred into executive 'Next Steps' agencies. Major's attempt to boost the accountability of service providers

through the Citizen's Charter, New Labour's private finance initiatives, and the Coalition's Big Society all sit within this shift towards privatisation and marketisation. Public sector leaders were required to focus on performance measures, promotion of competition, budgetary discipline, and balancing accountabilities to consumers and to the responsible minister.

Third, consumer choice became a core principle, intended to improve the responsiveness of public services. However, exercising 'choice' assumed people had a manageable array of information to make decisions – a challenge which has only intensified as public services have digitised.

### **Implications**

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#### **1. Public sector leadership needs historical context**

While leadership involves common challenges, institutions and sectors have distinct histories and identities. Leaders should see these as resources not burdens. History matters to people on the ground, and institutional memory – held in people's heads, in filing systems and in archives – is a valuable source of decision-making intelligence. We need these resources for routine business but also during times of crisis and recovery, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The question is: how are these histories captured, recorded and interpreted so leaders have access to usable intelligence when they need it?

#### **2. Public sector leadership needs process**

The assumption that effective public sector leadership means reducing regulation and bureaucracy is a legacy of the post-79 phase. Expertise is built on 'good bureaucracy': practices professionals follow to allow some confidence to be placed in the final outputs. Anticipating and addressing potential problems is part of good bureaucracy and can prevent costly consequences; less bureaucracy is not inevitably cheaper. The challenge for leaders is identifying the points at which investment in process is worthwhile.

### **3. Public sector leadership needs multiple forms of expertise**

The role of experts and expertise in public sector leadership was subject to recurring debate in post-war Britain. Experts have recently been characterised as at odds with 'ordinary people' and their representatives, an opposition that risks becoming an obstacle. In a digitised world, members of the public and leaders alike are overwhelmed with information – if anything we need *more* expertise to help interpret data and provide 'tools to think with'.

Public sector leaders cannot themselves be experts in all things. If they can recognise the importance and complementarity of different forms of knowledge, they can then build an ecosystem of expertise around themselves. Numbers are only part of the evidence picture; understanding histories, cultures and beliefs are all important to policymaking and implementation.

### **4. Public sector leadership needs collaboration**

In post-war Britain, the public has been tended to be viewed as either recipients or consumers of public services. Leaders could instead try to create systems that allow people to be engaged participants. Such systems are unlikely to follow existing top-down (government-designed or performance-managed) or bottom-up (consumer choice-driven) models. Co-creation approaches integrate multiple contributions, knowledge and priorities – including experts and users – to develop services that are acceptable, workable and beneficial to those involved.

**Alix R. Green** is a historian of contemporary Britain. She entered academia after a career in policy and government relations and her book, *History, Policy and Public Purpose* makes the case for historical thinking in government. Her current research involves collaborating with business archivists on mobilising their collections to inform present-day decisions and strategies.