

From Public Administration to New Public Management: who killed the study of public administration in the UK?



***Colin Talbot** discusses the public administration 'ecosystem' that existed in the UK and was replicated in various forms across many commonwealth countries. He explains what has changed in recent years and emphasises the role of universities, which have largely abandoned the topic.*

British Public Administration is dead. Or at the very least, on life-support. So what has died? I should start by stressing we're talking here about the study of, and educating about, the architecture for government and the delivery of its policies. This has mainly, but not exclusively, been a pursuit in universities. Or it was.

First, the teaching of Public Administration as a subject in its own right is almost moribund. There are a few Masters in Public Administration (MPAs) and in Public Policy (MPPs) in the UK but they mostly cater for the thriving international market, which has expanded hugely in the past two to three decades. There are no longer any undergraduate courses in Public Administration, as there were in the 1970s and '80s – just the odd module here and there on other courses.

Research is still relatively strong: contributions to the many international journals on Public Administration from UK scholars continue. There are even several journals nominally based in the UK. But you are much more likely to encounter British Public Administration experts at one of many international conferences than you are at any national events in the UK.

When I became an academic in 1990, the picture was very different. The first leg of the UK's Public Administration stool in 1990 was still provided by the Royal Institute for Public Administration (RIPA), founded in 1922. Together with *Public Administration*, the journal, founded at the same time, these really were 'world leading' – predating most others including the later, but eventually much larger, US Public Administration community. RIPA was a blend of academic and practitioner expertise – professors of government and permanent secretaries frequently met at RIPA events in their central London home, where it established a library and ran training courses.

'Sunningdale', or the Civil Service College as it was formally known, was the second leg. Set up in 1970 in the wake of the Fulton Report, at Sunningdale Park, Berkshire, the College provided training courses for thousands of civil servants. It also provided a venue, away from London, where senior civil servants, local government officers, academic experts and others could meet on short courses, seminars, and at conferences.

The third leg of this Public Administration stool was provided by the Public Administration Committee of the Joint University Council. The PAC was primarily an academic body but its Annual Conference – often held at Sunningdale – also attracted a significant number of senior civil servants.

This Public Administration 'ecosystem' of RIPA, Sunningdale, and the Public Administration Committee was replicated in various forms across many commonwealth countries and was undoubtedly world-leading. Only French and American systems were similar in their integration of national academic and practitioner expertise.

So what happened? The first leg to be hacked away was RIPA. It had made some dubious business decisions in the late 1980s but what finally did for it was an instruction by then Deputy PM Michael Heseltine to pull Whitehall funding in 1992. Sunningdale went through a process of change, becoming the National School for Government for a short while before being closed by the coalition Government in 2012. The Public Administration Committee – the mainly academic body – soldiers on but in much reduced form. And here we move into the murky world of academic fashions and institutional politics.

The study of government as a set of institutions gradually became unfashionable from the 1990s onwards. University departments of government became 'politics and international relations'. Undergraduate courses disappeared. At the same time, the eruption of business schools and MBAs consumed much of the more 'public management' side of Public Administration. In 1990, there were hardly any business schools or MBAs in the UK; within a decade both were more or less ubiquitous.

These changes also helped fragment UK Public Administration scholarship. Academics based in business schools – even when running 'public management' courses – were pulled towards management and business conferences and journals. As 'politics and IR' schools took over, the Public Administration element tended to dwindle, be marginalised, and pushed towards 'politics' journals and institutions.

Today, the UK Public Administration academic community is divided between the Public Administration Committee, the Public Management special interest group of the British Academy of Management, and the Public Policy and Administration group within the Political Studies Association. There is no single focus of professional community within the UK. More broadly, although there has been a small revival of interest in 'public policy' within universities, rather like Whitehall, this tends to neglect the 'implementation' side that Public Administration addresses.

So who killed British Public Administration? The main culprit is government itself – the deaths of RIPA and Sunningdale were mortal blows. But academia has also helped – unlike in virtually every other advanced democracy. British universities and academics have largely abandoned Public Administration. It is not that there are no British academics active in the field – there are. But there is no one institutional home and focus for these efforts so they tend to fly under the radar. And the change in focus within the field – from Public Administration to 'New' Public Management – also opened it up to absorption by the new Business Schools in the 1990s. But that is another story.

About the Author



Colin Talbot is Emeritus Professor of Government at the University of Manchester, and an LSE graduate.

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