

Bureaucracy in the Anthropocene: a research agenda for Public Administration scholars



The government's civil service reform agenda offers very little that suggests how planned reforms will build institutional resilience for the Anthropocene, writes [Nick Kirsop-Taylor](#). He nevertheless writes that this epoch represents the greatest threat to states globally, and explains why the UK needs a Public Administration research agenda that places these challenges at its heart.

For the 2020 [Ditchley lecture](#), the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Rt. Hon. Michael Gove, gave a talk on 'The privilege of public service'. This lecture offered broad but, in many ways, ambiguous suggestions on this government's priorities for civil service reform. There have already been a number of [critical rebuttals](#) to this lecture. I want to add to this by highlighting another area in which it failed to offer a vision for the civil service: how it responds to current and future ecological crises. These are the real big-ticket issues of our times; though crises such as the climate emergency and the sixth global extinction event are not standalone issues, but individual facets of world that is being profoundly changed by human activities. Some call this the [Anthropocene](#) epoch – and how the civil service reforms to meet this, matters.

[Anthony Giddens](#), [Ulrich Beck](#) and others have all argued convincingly how our modern is intrinsically bound up in the escalating environmental crises of this epoch. In short, the Anthropocene is [changing everything](#), and all aspects of human civilisation are going to be impacted by its increased [risks](#), complexities, costs and crises. Although the social sciences took a few years to orientate towards the consequences of the Anthropocene, its impacts on societies, economies, cultures and all else are increasingly becoming clear. From a [political science perspective](#) these challenges will stress the state, the public sphere, our politics, and what we think of as 'good governance' (amongst others). It will test our [political leadership](#), the purpose and functioning of the state, and how we continue to strive for good governance. So, whilst the 'the environment' was mentioned by Michael Gove three times in the Ditchley lecture, none of these mentions offered any concrete explanations of how the civil service will pivot towards and reform in the face of these challenges, and that's problematic.

This isn't worrying in a future sense, because rising issues of environmental change-induced risk, uncertainty, and intensity are *already* stressing UK public and civil services. And as history [teaches us](#), where states and bureaucracies can't or won't adapt fast enough to environmental change, then the risks of institutional decay and failure are clear. And as others have rightly pointed out, the UK civil service is already institutionally un-resilient after decades of fragmentation, a point painfully exposed by [COVID-19](#).

Many bureaucratic institutions are already racing to keep up with changes in risk and complexity of issues such as climate migration, water governance, and pollution. And there is a rich seam of academic literature exploring bureaucratic [organisational](#) and managerial responses to these challenges. However, as this literature is starting to reveal, tweaking existing structures and activities fails to take account of the scale and rate of challenges the Anthropocene is going to place on bureaucracies. These forces will, in time, shake bureaucracies (such as the UK civil service) to their very foundations. Tinkering and tweaking at the edges of existing managerialist structures ignores the depth of the challenges coming in the next century: it demands a more fundamental enquiry into what society in the Anthropocene demands from governance through bureaucracy.

Whilst there is an emergent discussion about the impacts of the [Anthropocene on the state](#), and the impact of the [climate crisis on bureaucracy](#), there has not as yet been a wider and fundamental debate about how the Anthropocene epoch has the potential to fundamentally change what we consider good governance through bureaucracy. In practice this means that the academic discipline of Public Administration needs to be prepared to re-evaluate the foundations of the bureaucracy inasmuch as they might and are being affected in this new epoch. I'd like to suggest three core areas in which this reappraisal might like to focus:

Firstly, these challenges have the potential to add significant and exponential complexity to the remits of public departments and agencies. Whilst the challenges of rising complexity are already [on the agenda](#), the challenges of this new epoch are going to add new layers to this. As they seek to better integrate complex social (including behavioural), economic, ecological insights drawn from a wider range of data (including big data) into decision-making, the potential for complexity rises. Whilst [technology](#) might mitigate this somewhat, climate change and other ecological concerns will add new layers of stress on the neat disciplinary boundaries that demark bureaucratic fiefdoms. It will increase the need for speed, reflexivity, conceptualising complexity and integrated service provision like never before.

Secondly, building on issues of rising interdisciplinarity and complexity, the Anthropocene will require bureaucratic institutions to become increasingly reflexive and agile to change, and adaptive in the face of shifting priorities and mandate. Whilst issues of [reflexivity](#) and [adaptivity](#) are already on the agenda for Public Administration scholars, these are only starting to engage with the Anthropocene-induced drivers of reflexivity and adaptivity. There are deeper questions about how to institute adaptive and reflexive organisational cultures under strict political and managerial controls.

Finally, this will precipitate more fundamental challenges to notions of bureaucratic accountability. In an age of democratic deficits and political environmental inaction, it will question to whom bureaucrats are ultimately accountable: their current political masters or the citizens of today and future generations? This could precipitate out in all manner of bureaucratic accountability conflicts or [inside activism](#). In some ways, [public policy](#) and [citizen steers](#) might help to reconcile [accountability conflicts](#), though arguably these speak to a far older conundrum of: to whom the bureaucracy owes its prime accountability. These forces of change might further force Public Administration scholars and practitioners to reconsider the role of morality and (environmental) ethics in the administering the public space in the Anthropocene.

These are just three examples. One of main challenges is, wherever these issues might have been identified and/or addressed in scholarly activity or practice, they are treated as standalone issue areas and not in an integrated and inter-related fashion. The Anthropocene is about integrated and complex challenges, and so too should Public Administration scholarly efforts at trying to understand how bureaucracies will withstand and respond to it. Other Public Administrative perspectives should include the resilience of different administrative traditions to the challenges of the Anthropocene; the role of bureaucratic interdisciplinary expertise in complexity decision-making; shifting institutional bureaucratic logics in the Anthropocene; or the new forms of adaptive organisational structure and change.

So, whilst the recent Ditchley lecture offered an interesting perspective on the current administration's plans for its civil service reform agenda, it really offered very little that suggested how these reforms would build institutional resilience for the Anthropocene. This failure to recognise the apolitical challenges of this new epoch was troubling – and doesn't bode well for a civil service that was already fragmented and worn down from ten years of public sector austerity.

The Anthropocene is here and now. It represents the greatest threat to states and citizens the world over. We need a public sector reform agenda, and a Public Administration research agenda that places this at its heart.

About the Author



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