

The state of British politics today is in part a consequence of decades of underinvestment in public administration education and research



Ian Elliott discusses the more systemic factors behind the various controversies in British politics in recent years. He writes that while poor leadership is often discussed as a key contributing factor, it is a rather simple explanation for so many differing events over such a sustained period of time.

There is a growing sense both in Britain and abroad that standards of UK public life have fallen to an all-time low. In a [recent speech](#), the former Prime Minister, The Rt Hon Sir John Major, stated:

If trust in our word is lost *overseas*, we may no longer be able to work effectively with friends and partners for mutual benefit – or even security. Unfortunately, that trust *is* being lost, and our reputation overseas has fallen because of our conduct. We are *weakening* our influence in the world.

And the Speaker of the House, Sir Lindsay Hoyle, felt obliged [to remind MPs](#) that, ‘our words have consequences and we should always be mindful of that fact’. This was in response to intimidating and threatening behaviour experienced by the Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Foreign Secretary following comments by the Prime Minister which were deemed inappropriate (though not disorderly).

Most recently there has been widespread discontent around the [government’s marginal response toward Ukrainian refugees](#), which is just one of the latest in a long list of crises and controversies where the UK response has been found wanting. Others include the c.170,000 deaths related to COVID-19 at the time of writing; the illegal prorogation of Parliament; attempts to change the rules on MPs’ standards to protect the former environment secretary; and widespread allegations of fraud. That’s not to mention the COVID-19 lockdown parties, the resulting fines, including to Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak, concerns over the handling of PPE contracts, and the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Many commentators have pointed to poor leadership as a possible contributing factor towards these various crises and controversies. Yet this is a rather simple explanation for so many differing events over such a sustained period, not to mention during the premiership of three different Prime Ministers over the last six years. Might there be another, more systemic, factor behind these issues?

In [our research](#) we explore the current state of the UK polity, in the context of 100 years of the eminent academic journal [Public Administration](#). This first began as the journal of the Institute for Public Administration (later Royal Institute), which was in turn an attempt in the aftermath of the first World War to develop stronger links between academia and policymakers in a way that would strengthen the British State. Yet the links between practitioners and academics and, in particular, the willingness of politicians to engage with evidence, was always a source of some tension. In 1972, it was [lamented that](#), ‘in the establishment of public administration as an academic subject, Britain is still an under-developed country’.

Little has changed in the following fifty years. The Royal Institute of Public Administration (RIPA) came into considerable financial trouble, partly as a result of successive recessions and government cutbacks and, in the absence of any government support, was closed in 1992. However, the journal continued to thrive, albeit with an increasingly academic and international focus as *Public Administration: An International Quarterly*, with Blackwell Wiley as publishers.

This is an important context as in part it demonstrates the attitude of successive governments towards academia in general and public administration scholarship in particular. Whilst some have argued that the name itself – public administration – is problematic given the old-fashioned connotations of ‘administration’, it might be fairer to argue that it is the ‘public’ that has proven to be the real sticking point. In our [research](#), we take a contemporary perspective on the current state of the UK. The overriding analysis is of decentralisation and differentiation that has led to a largely fragmented state. This fragmentation is evidence at multiple layers of the UK policy: places, providers, and professionals.

The devolution process has undoubtedly contributed to a sense of fragmentation of place across the UK and the rise of nationalist parties has led to heightening questions around the future of the UK state as an entity. At the same time, there are ongoing tensions between local, devolved, and UK governments as well as varied attempts to introduce a form of regional government or greater devolution in England, most recently centred on debates around the Northern Powerhouse and Levelling Up agenda.

The fragmentation of providers has been influenced through various reforms to increase competition, collaboration, and partnership working (or integration) across the public, private, and third sectors. This has been described as the [Hollowing Out of the State](#) and whilst there is evidence of reduced costs, there are also many examples of reduced service quality and agility. The preoccupation with efficiency has particularly come to light through the COVID-19 pandemic, with hospitals quickly running out of capacity whilst other, less efficient healthcare systems around the world have not been as severely affected. At the same time, the increasingly complex provider landscape has led ministers to lament the lack of coordination across public services and the challenge in working across complex networks to address ongoing wicked issues.

Finally, public service professionals have found themselves increasingly outsourced, under-resourced, underpaid, and over-inspected. There has been some investment in physical infrastructure (pre-2008), particularly with the Private Finance Initiative but no such investment in the skills and development of public service workers. [Recent research](#) shows that only 16 UK universities offer degree-level education (either postgraduate or undergraduate) in public administration. Yet 17.3% of UK employment as a whole is in the public sector. There are calls for more collaborative working, with health and social care being a prime example, but at the same time, different parts of the public sector and different parts of the UK have developed their own distinct approaches to public leadership and staff development.

What we are seeing today is the consequence of decades of underinvestment in public administration education, professional development, and research. Where there have been innovative policy experiments, they have typically taken place without formal evaluation and valuable learning has been lost. The potential creation of a Government Campus and Leadership College for Government offers some hope but only if the lessons from the RIPA, the Civil Service College, and the National School of Government (all now closed) are taken on board.

The [Public Administration Committee](#) of the Joint University Council remains the only UK learned society for public administration and may provide a valuable link between universities and professional development. But this will require sustained investment and a renewed commitment to building knowledge, skills, and capacity – not only within the current public service workforce but, through embedding public administration at undergraduate-level study, in the future public service workforce and wider voting public.

It is yet to be seen if the government will be willing to truly invest in public administration education – to do so would be to buck the trend of the last 100 years.

About the Author

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