

Geoffrey Kingdon Fry and the British road to public sector reform

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Abstract

To mark the 2023 death of GK Fry this note focuses attention on the approach to public sector reform in Britain discussed in his many works. Starting with his criticism of the 1968 Fulton Committee Report, his work developed a view of reform that foreshadowed debates that later went under the label of ‘new public management’ by at least 20 years. This note explains how he argued that a ‘positive state’ or Fabian approach dominated thinking about public administration for so long and largely accounted for the failure of most of the reforms of the postwar period until the 1980s. Fry’s background and interests to some degree help explain how he reached this perspective and how he set it out, so this note begins and ends with some outline of his life, career and outlook.

Keywords

Public sector reform, civil service, administrative theory, central administration, new public management, public administration

My friend Geoff Fry died on May 21st 2023 aged 85 years. Fry was a prolific, engaged and engaging author known best for a standard history of the British civil service since the mid-19th century, for some of the finest research on the UK postwar civil service as well as for his interpretations of British politics since the 1930s. This tribute to him concentrates on setting out the clear, consistent and important insight his work on the machinery of government in Britain offers into the progress of public sector reform in the postwar years. Though different in origin, Fry’s work foreshadowed debates that later went under the label ‘new public management’ by at least 20 years. His background and interests to some

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degree help explain how he reached this perspective and how he set it out, so this note must begin and end with some outline of his life, career and outlook.

Fry's path to *academe* was by current standards somewhat unusual. Born into a modest background in Bristol in 1937, he was raised on the Isle of Wight after his family moved there in 1941. He served in Aden during his National Service in the Royal Air Force between 1955 and 1957 after which he joined the civil service, staying for a couple of years 'never advancing beyond the status of a humble Executive Officer' (Fry 1969: 8). He went on to study at the London School of Economics (LSE) in 1959, originally intending to return to the civil service, but Michael Oakeshott encouraged him to stay on for postgraduate work. He went on to a lectureship at Leeds in 1966, replacing George W Jones, just before he completed his LSE PhD in 1967 under the supervision of HRG (Richard) Greaves. Fry spent his entire career at Leeds University and retired in 2003 from his position as Professor of British Government and Administration. While his research for the most part focussed on machinery of government issues he also appeared occasionally on Yorkshire Television and BBC radio as an election pundit and generally had an excellent record when it came to political prediction and analysis.

Statesmen in Disguise, a study of the Administrative Class of the UK Civil Service from 1853 to 1966, was based on his PhD thesis and made the point that Britain had failed to develop the machinery of government – the structures, operating norms, procedures, personnel and deployment of skills – needed to run successfully a modern welfare state. The 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan Report was widely regarded as the fundamental event that brought modernisation in its wake. Fry disagreed. 'To the extent that in important respects [the Northcote-Trevelyan Report] ever was implemented', it only seemed to have an impact 'at the earliest, about 1920' and change since that time remained sluggish, he later argued (Fry 1999: 535). The wealth of detail helped make the book a definitive account of the modern history of the civil service.

Statesmen in Disguise contained a long postscript by way of commentary on the 1968 Fulton Committee Report, regarded by many as a landmark in the modernisation of the civil service. One might have thought Fulton's advocacy of more specialism in the civil service, of moving away from the 'generalist all-rounder' and of ending the separation of the top 'Administrative Class' from the wider service would have appealed to him: the main text of *Statesmen* seems to advocate the same. Yet Fulton, he argued in this postscript, was an 'unimpressive piece of work' and 'by no means ... the "wide-ranging and fundamental review" that the Prime Minister [Harold Wilson] said it was' (Fry 1969 pp. 363-5), not least because it ignored wider questions of the machinery of government, including, above all, the doctrine of ministerial responsibility.

One can see in this commentary on Fulton the origins of his broad framework for understanding the unfolding landscape of administrative reforms from the 1950s to the 1990s. The perspective is set out perhaps most explicitly in his 1995 *Policy and Management in the Civil Service*. Fry distinguishes between three British reform traditions: an 'insider' tradition represented by senior officials within the civil service, and two 'outsider' traditions, one representing a 'positive state' or 'Fabian Socialist' tradition and the other the perspective of 'economic liberalism' (Fry 1995a: 137). One can broadly characterise these last two as representing 'state' versus 'market-oriented' approaches to

the nature of government respectively. The insider tradition was more variable but always had a limited impact on reform, partly because it was constrained by the political interests of those who represented the outside traditions – politicians and those who had their ears – and partly because sustained external support was needed to give effect the kinds of reforms needed for genuine change. Of the ‘outsider’ traditions, the ‘positive state’ tradition was in the ascendancy more or less up until the election of the Thatcher administration in 1979 and economic liberalism was till then at best marginalised and even ridiculed.

Across his books and many articles on the civil service and machinery of government Fry’s views generally reflected this broad framework. He ranged widely across the field from the growth of public services and the nature of ministerial responsibility to the redress of grievances and the details of civil service pay. His *‘Administrative Revolution in Whitehall’* is an elaborate statement of the failure of the positive state approach to reform. In it he looks at a host of postwar reform initiatives including the creation of ‘super-ministries’ such as the Department of Health and Social Security, the reform of the structures for public spending decisions (including the Public Expenditure Survey Committee and Programme Analysis and Review), the policy planning ideals such as seen in the Central Policy Review Staff, various arrangements for economic management and planning, changes to the governance of defence and diplomacy and the ‘ombudsman’ system (Fry 1981). This ‘orgy of reform’ achieved very little. Some changes were worth the effort, such as the creation of the institution of the ‘ombudsman’, but they were ‘rare nuggets in a dross of usually worthless changes’ (Fry 1981: 181). That they failed to achieve anything of significance was not a result of the way they were implemented, but the consequence of being based in the Fabian/positive state reform tradition. This tradition harboured the illusion that it was possible to find organisational solutions to the fundamental problems created by an over-commitment by the state to producing rising incomes for its citizens, full employment, rising standards of living and continually improving public services. He had characterised this in an earlier work as reflecting the view that ‘changing the machinery of government in often superficial ways was preferred to examining the assumptions of the Positive State and the Keynesian theory on which it rested’ (Fry 1979: 205).

He saw one of the early cracks in the positive state/Fabian approach to reform, funnily enough, when he came back to reconsider Fulton in the light of newly-released papers and evidence as well as additional interviews he conducted for his 1993 book *Reforming the Civil Service*. The book is of wider interest because it sets out the detail of how the Fulton Committee worked and the political considerations that limited the kinds of conclusions that it produced. One key focus of his later research on Fulton was the ‘Management Consultancy Group’, set up to provide the research evidence for the Committee (Fry 1993 see also Fry 1995b). This appeared to Fry to be the most important source of any innovations proposed in the Report. In particular he saw it as bringing in the notion of ‘private sector techniques’ into public sector management thinking, or, as Fry puts it, ‘it put the adoption of the best private sector management practice into a prominent place on the Fabian socialist agenda for civil service reform’ (Fry 1991: 437), a contradiction that eventually helped undermine this particular reform tradition. The Group’s deliberations

provided a first proper airing for notions of public management accountability framed in an economic-liberal tradition, including among some key insiders, which re-emerged later under the Thatcher administration. If Fry doubted its later direct impact on the reforms of the Thatcher era, the Group at least made insiders aware of a range of approaches to reform that were possible from a different perspective. He was particularly pleased that his own work on civil service pay (see Fry 1974) was taken up by the Megaw Committee when it started work in 1981 and contributed to this change in fortune for an economic-liberal approach.

Ultimately, however, it was the economic and fiscal problems of the 1970s that 'knocked away the Keynesian prop' that underpinned positive state reformism. Such changes, and the centralisation, standardisation and uniformity that they sought to introduce, became increasingly exposed as a 'charade' and the positive state tradition cast aside (Fry 1995a: 139). Enough leading figures in the Conservative Government, including the Prime Minister, had the commitment to start and sustain a 'Long March through Whitehall'. The changes they introduced, above all the Next Steps agencies but including the abolition the Civil Service Commission and introducing different pay and grading bands for different ministries and organizations as well as the wider programme of deregulating public services constituted, if anything does, more of a revolution than the 'shiny shop windows or just changing names' that characterised the reforms of the Wilson and Heath years (Fry 1995a: 50). Fry did, however, point out that reform even with such a commitment from the Tory leadership was often a case of 'one step forwards and two steps back' (Fry 1997). Nevertheless, while he did not directly comment at length on the civil service in the Blair years and after, the central point was that the Thatcher years saw the end of the positive state approach to administrative reform.

Fry's approach to public administration and those who studied it reflected his views on administrative reform in the sense that he believed it had been long dominated by a Fabian/positive state tradition. In his 1998 inaugural lecture at Leeds (see Fry 1999) he made clear how unimpressed he was with the founding parents of British public administration, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, who were responsible for the dominance of a Fabian tradition of public administration in the first place. They wanted 'a State ruled by officials or experts who are socialists' and their lasting influence 'ensured that the form that the academic study of public administration took in Britain was forbidding in tone and one of frustrated pragmatism'. If the 1940s and 1950s were an era of parochialism, the comparative work of scholars in the 1960s, above all influenced by CH Sisson and Brian Chapman were not much to his liking either.

Eventually, once the presumed lessons of the Suez adventure had sunk in, and involvement in 'Europe' came to be in fashion, at least in the political class, and with the pretence that everything in the Swedish form of social democracy was interesting in full swing, the mood in much of the more popular writing anyway changed from the parochialism that Sisson typified to an outlook of 'paragons begin at Calais' which proved to be equally tiresome [as the earlier parochialism] (Fry 1999: 531)

Although he is more appreciative of some leading figures from the ‘golden age of public administration’ in the 1960s, above all SE Finer, WJM Mackenzie and AH Hanson, he still regarded the discipline as dominated by an atmosphere of the kind of ‘compulsive reformism favoured by the Fabian founders and carried forward by [William A] Robson’ that offered a far more positive evaluation of how much had changed and for the better than he was prepared to give. Fry was, paradoxically, a great admirer of Robson’s work and once told me that while ‘close to the Webbs, there was no sign that Robson followed them down the road to worshipping the Soviet Union, and, thus, political lunacy’. While Fry might have approved of the exploration of a range of management techniques in public services, he was unimpressed by Osborne and Gaebler’s *Reinventing Government* which he described as ‘no more than an inferior contribution to the tradition of American homespun sentimentalism epitomized by the Frank Capra films *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* and *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*’ (Fry 1999: 537).

Many of his views, whether on the civil service, British politics more generally or the study of public administration and government, appeared to reflect an awareness of the centrality of class in shaping attitudes, behaviour and even scholarship in Britain. Geoff once said that as a National Service conscript he ‘took some care never to make it even to corporal’ and this observation holds significant meaning when one looks at his broad work. His humble upbringing, his exposure to the officer class during his National Service as well as his experiences as a student at LSE are covered in his semi-autobiographical novel (published under the name of JR Merstone) *Are My Eyes Really Brown?* (Fry 2013a). While he certainly did not develop any general antipathy towards establishment figures, he showed no enthusiasm to join them because he thought many were, not to put too fine a point on it, not nearly as good at doing their jobs as they thought they were. Moreover, their separation as a distinct officer class (and its civil service equivalent in the ‘administrative class’ or in academia through various perceived indicators of status) not only allowed them to think they were good at their jobs but also helped prevent change and giving chances to people with ideas about how to do the job better. His scepticism for academic election forecasting was confirmed with his accurate and against-the-consensus prediction of a surprise 30-seat majority for Ted Heath in 1970 which ‘was entirely derived from talking to the university cleaners’.

This class dimension and a desire for radicalism might have led some to the radical left, but not Geoff. In his inaugural lecture at Leeds in 1998 he explained why it did not: ‘In a liberal democratic system of the British kind, what I took to be socialism would not prevail without the use of force. So, the future lay with economic liberalism. As this was and is, to my mind, a revolutionary creed, and certainly a radical one, this was not necessarily to be applauded by an unbeliever like myself, except in terms of the alternative’ (Fry 1999: 534-5). In part this might help explain why he did not like the LSE all that much – it was a ‘Webbsian creation’ – and why he felt the socialist academic Ralph Miliband did much at the time to damage the Leeds Politics Department when he headed it, until it was rescued by his successors, notably Kevin Theakston. Despite his admiration for the Thatcher administration, clear in his impressive trilogy of books on British politics between the 1930s and 1990 (Fry 2001, 2005, 2008), Fry declared he was an ‘untrue believer’ in economic liberalism: one who saw it coming long before other academic

commentators, even saw some of its advantages, but repeatedly rejected being described as an economic liberal himself.

After he became professor emeritus and once he had honoured his academic book contracts, and with the exception of a novel which explored the possibilities of a populist takeover in Britain, Geoff turned to other kinds of writing. As he had supported Portsmouth Football Club since 1947, he wrote its history in a book called *Bury My Heart at Fratton Park* (Fry 2013b). He followed this by writing no fewer than seven novels with, aside from the political one, content and style reflecting his interest in classic cinema. Given Fry's reputation for cynicism, that two were explicitly romances may have surprised some, but Geoff told me that 'cynicism was the first refuge that romantics seek when life disappointed them'. He was an outright romantic, never failing to give his wife a bunch of flowers every week of their marriage of more than half a century together with an array of Valentine and anniversary cards. His favourite film was, of course, *Casablanca*. It was rumoured he could recite the whole script by heart.

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