



[BOOKS: J. R. NETHERCOTE]

A historical masterpiece: trials tribulations, fortune and fate

The British civil service

Rodney Lowe's official history highlights important failings in Australian scholarship

More than 40 years ago, there was a major inquiry into the British civil service, the last of its kind in Britain – and one of the last of its kind in the Westminster world.

Known as the Fulton committee – after its chairman, Sussex University vice-chancellor Lord Fulton – it was established by and reported to Harold Wilson's Labour government; a government which started out in 1964 with visions of itself as a great force for Britain's belated modernisation.

Some of the Fulton authors saw the report as the foundation for the civil service for decades to come; the plan for remedying multiple deficiencies in the service, especially the egregious role and influence of the Treasury and the despised administrative class, and placing the service, in today's language, "ahead of the game".

The report and its aftermath fell well short of this lofty goal, though the administrative class did not

survive – replaced by a more open senior policy and management group – and the Treasury was divided; its civil service management responsibilities transferred to a new, but short-lived, Civil Service Department. The first volume of Professor Rodney Lowe's new book, *The Official History of the British Civil Service* ends with the abolition of that department by the Thatcher government.

The enthusiasts behind Fulton, led by the Oxford history don and later rector of Exeter College, Dr Norman Hunt (subsequently Lord Crowther-Hunt), did not simply cry foul; they espied conspiracy. (The permanent secretary to the Treasury from 1974-83, Sir Douglas Wass, said "whether it is right to regard the opposition of the civil service to ill-thought ideas as a conspiracy . . . is a matter of terminology".)

The Fultonites were not alone. The Conservative Party, in opposition, also had great plans for reform that came strongly into play after it won the 1970 general elections and Ted Heath replaced Wilson in 10 Downing Street. The Conservatives brought with them not only a so-called black book, an "urgent action dossier", but a team of people from business. Their preoccupations were

establishing within Whitehall a "central capability"; a ministry of programs modelled on the then US Bureau of the Budget (the Office of Management and the Budget's predecessor); and an assault on the size of government itself. They made some, but not great, progress.

The theme of energetic, enthusiastic, committed reformers losing out to wily, experienced mandarins is not new and has had many later evocations. Here, in Australia, the story is oft-told of how the public service, under the Fraser government, frustrated the noble ambitions of the Coombs Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration established by the "reformist" Whitlam government. Peter Wilenski often cited the Coombs experience as a classic case of non-implementation.

There have previously been significant studies of the Fulton project. But, based on the government archive, and much else besides, the new book by Lowe, of Bristol University, provides not only a very full account of the trials, tribulations, failings, fortunes and fate of Fulton itself, but also of an important range of other activity shaping British government and administration in the late 20th century.



Illuminating the past: Rodney Lowe's official history of Britain's civil service sheds light on contemporary reform debates



This is as good a point as any to declare an interest: in the life of Lowe's project, I provided him with some small help during a visit to Australia, including, in association with the Public Service Commission, organising a round table about administrative reform in the Australian government. I subsequently attended a "witness" seminar on the civil service at Churchill College, Cambridge. It was time well spent.

Though surviving Fulton partisans are unlikely to be happy with Lowe's account, this would be to ignore the great qualities of his research in illuminating the workings of government and administration, and the processes and pitfalls of reform in government.

The focus is reform, but this term is interpreted broadly, dynamically and in the context of both the institutions of British government and of Britain itself. It is a very sophisticated study of the reform activity within government, the range of forces and ideas in play, the inter-relationships between reformers of various ilk, ministers, parliamentarians, departments and staff associations. Lowe is especially adept in drawing out the interactions of individuals within respective institutional frameworks.

A theme to which Lowe frequently returns is the powers of central agencies to direct departments; the need for real power and not only the power of persuasion. It partly depends on what is actually being pursued, but his observation that those "awaiting reform could only be persuaded, not ordered, to accept it" is an obvious but usually neglected insight and basically applies whatever may be the formal structure of power.

Lowe concludes of the fate of Fulton and the black book, "The fundamental cause of the relative failure of both . . . was not bureaucratic conspiracy. Neither was it contingency nor management failure (of which there were both many). Rather these blueprints failed because of their own shortcomings. Moreover, they lacked essential political support."

But did the reform movement fail? Well, not really. Lowe writes, "In both deeds and words . . . the years between 1968 and 1972 anticipated most of the reforms that were to change the nature of the service over succeeding decades."

It is tempting to suggest that reform, like God, moves in mysterious ways, its wonders to perform. The path is rarely simple or straight. And nor is reform necessarily a

matter for great luminaries or even great ideas. Sir Frank Cooper, a major figure in Whitehall during those years, said it should have "the permanent attention of a tough, mature and experienced manager rather than an outstanding intellectual". (Most public services have chosen, in recent decades, to ignore this counsel.)

Commendation of this book derives only in small part from its account of the Fulton committee, its aftermath, and the assorted initiatives after the Heath government arrived.

The opening chapter of the book takes the reader back 100 years, to the Northcote-Trevelyan era and the early attempts to introduce merit and open competition. It is followed by another dealing with the 35 years when, essentially, Sir Warren Fisher and, later, Sir Edward Bridges, held the reins. Lowe asks whether this was the "golden age" of civil service: golden ages are especially contentious possibilities.

A third chapter examines various initiatives in the decade before Fulton, when the focus of much activity was the Plowden review of the management and control of public spending, and the moves beyond annuality in public-sector budgeting. It is also the decade which sees a reorganisation of the Treasury, one part concentrating on finance and economics, the other on pay and management of the civil service.

Unlike most academic studies locked into a Northcote-Trevelyan framework, this book has a comprehensive perspective on the civil service. Lowe incorporates civil service industrial relations – known as Whitleyism – into the story. Nor does he neglect technological developments, as these affect, often decisively, the handling of public business.

It is not simply that the reader gets a very long take on the development of the civil service and the requisites of reform. A great advantage of this book is that readers also get a history of debates about the civil service. Before the Fulton story starts, there is much about central philosophical foundations of the service, its structure and organisation, the strength of departments, the merit principle and open competition, anonymity, political activity by staff, and the ubiquitous impact and inhibitions of doctrines of ministerial responsibility.

The reader learns, among other things, about the effects of political parties on the service; the growing role of staff associations; and the various aspirations held for bringing business ideas and people into the conduct of government business.

Lowe may leave some stones unturned but it is not easy to find them.

Officials in Australia might not be especially interested in the details of the story Lowe tells. But the issues he raises, the questions he asks, should provoke much thought. The principal quality of the book lies not in narrative but in analysis. It is for that reason that Australian officials, especially the more senior, should read it.

Lowe's book is an official history. One of his many services to scholarship is to explain and ruminate upon the nature of such history, once castigated by Sir Basil Liddell Hart as "official but not history". Noting that "capture" is an occupational hazard for all historians, he points out that, these days, the territory has usually been covered previously by investigative journalists and social scientists. "The real challenge to an official historian's integrity lies rather in the location of the most relevant data amongst so large an accumulation of files. The prime objective of this history . . . is not to stifle but to stimulate informed and independent debate . . . No historian should rest easy until his or her work has become not the 'last word' but the source of its own obsolescence."

Britain has had official histories for more than a century but, until World War II, they mainly concerned defence subjects. The Australian historian, Sir Keith Hancock, was the first editor of a civil series, inaugurated during the 1940s. Other books in the series of which Lowe's book forms a part include a history of Britain and the European Community; Britain and the Channel tunnel; privatisation; and secrecy and the media (D-notices).

Australia lacks any comparable program. New Zealand has; and the sesquicentenary of NSW witnessed a veritable small library on the politics of the oldest state but, with a few exceptions, especially concerning the Parliament, it generally ignored government.

Should Australia have an official histories program? The answer is, inevitably, yes. Lowe's first volume itself demonstrates the value of such endeavours. As do, also, the numerous achievements of the history group in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and its counterparts in Defence. The Reserve Bank is attentive to its own history but its various volumes, from such distinguished authors as L. F. Giblin, Boris Schedvin and Selwyn Cornish, have no Treasury counterparts: Aust-



ralia is the poorer as a consequence.

Good history – institutional memory – has its own virtue but the reasons are more immediate. As the former head of Britain’s civil service, Sir Richard Wilson, who took the initiative on this project, has written, “If you want to reform a great institution, you must understand it; and if you want to understand it, you need to understand its past.” This history was expressly commissioned with the aim of “directly enhancing the ‘collective memory’ of government”. Too often, where the Australian Public Service is concerned, “collective memory” is more an object of derision than enhancement.

A second question is what would we want histories about? Here are some starting suggestions: tariff policy; government business enterprises and privatisation; the Commonwealth and universities; the Commonwealth and education; and federal financial

relations. And, most obvious of all, the APS.

The worthy publications produced for the centenary of the Federation do not meet the bill. Nor do most publications in this field deriving from various grant programs, linkage and otherwise, funded by the Australian Research Council.

The fault lies mostly with the ARC: it simply does not allow sufficient time for quality work. The working precept appears to be that which cannot be done swiftly should not be done at all – and it shows in the publications. Australia will never get the history of its government that it deserves whilst ever its scholars must work within the straitjackets imposed by this questionable quango.

Australian projects of this character have, in this splendid book, an example of high standards to which our institutions of government, and

our scholars, should aspire. But any emulation in Australia of this masterpiece remains, regrettably, unlikely.

Volume II of Lowe’s enterprise is eagerly awaited. Those on this side of the globe, however, can only lament that we do not look forward to similar accomplishment by our scholars researching and writing about our own institutions.

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Rodney Lowe’s *The Official History of the British Civil Service – Reforming the Civil Service, Vol 1: The Fulton years, 1966-81* is published by Routledge (2011).

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