INTRODUCTION

Today is the fortieth anniversary of my joining the civil service and the thirty-third anniversary of being seconded to the United Nations to help Herbert Emmerich (Professor of Public Administration, Chicago University) prepare the UN Handbook of Public Administration. It is also the fourth anniversary of returning to that subject at the beginning of a new career as adviser on administrative reform in several countries.

It is difficult to distil my experiences into about thirty minutes but the British Council compelled me to try when they invited me to direct an international seminar on Better Government and Administrative Reform in June of this year. Twenty-six countries were represented – Costa Rica to Poland, Canada to New Zealand, the USA to Indonesia and Brunei, Sweden to Namibia. The delegates were Cabinet Ministers to Deputy Secretaries. This paper is based on my opening remarks and the discussions at the seminar, on a subsequent seminar at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in New York – and on continuing debate in a number of countries about good governance. It contains more questions than answers and explores the hypothesis which connects administrative reform with better government.

I propose to work backwards through my title, starting with good governance. Thus the explanation of the Caribbean calypso will come last!

GOOD GOVERNANCE

Why is the issue of good governance relevant now? The prospectus for the British Council seminar set out the reasons in late 1989:

Sir Kenneth Stowe, Permanent Secretary, DHSS 1981–87 and a Vice-President of RIPA Council gave the above post-AGM lecture to RIPA on 28 November 1991.
The need for reform of central and local government is confronting governments world-wide, in developed as much as in developing countries, and in many different political contexts. Excessive costs, poor service to the public and failure to achieve the aims of policy are a common experience – poor performance, waste, and low morale feeding a downward spiral of inefficiency. Economic constraints, demographic change, rising public expectations and media exposure of failure have combined to make reform urgent (The British Council 1991).

I think that these claims are still valid but administrative reform is about means, not ends. It has taken a long time for international institutions and national governments to open up the issue about ends. What is the point of good public administration if it does not support good governance? What, indeed, is good governance? There was no reference to it in the UN Handbook. The first authoritative reference I know was in 1989, in a World Bank report on Sub-Saharan Africa which defined it as 'a public service that is efficient, a judicial system that is reliable and an administration that is accountable to the public.'

I think that there is more to it than that. I also think that it is highly dangerous to suppose that the prescription was appropriate only for Africa or the Third World. Falling short of goodness in government is a common experience in any and all nations, not excluding the UK. Indeed, in the UK, rather than having 'a judicial system that is reliable' what we have had is a spectacular series of miscarriages of justice, involving both the police and the judiciary and a Royal Commission has been set up to deal with a massive scandal.

I suggest that we have here in Britain the same need as elsewhere to define and clarify what we mean by good governance, and then test our own performance; and I set out six desiderata for this:

1. political freedom, including free speech and a freely elected Parliament, assembly or legislature;
2. constitutional and judicial protection for the rights of the individual;
3. the maintenance of the rule of law by an independent judiciary;
4. the maintenance of a stable currency, the essential underpinning of economic and social development;
5. development of society as a whole by education and health care; and finally
6. executive accountability to a freely-elected legislature.

Note that I do not include the World Bank's 'public service that is efficient' in my desiderata of good government. This is something to which I will return.

It is interesting to note that such political debate as there is in the UK on good governance tends to focus overseas, emanating from the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The Minister at the ODA, Mrs Lynda Chalker, in a speech to the Overseas Development Institute linked overseas aid with good governance, and interestingly specified education and health as examplars. I am an enthusiastic supporter of the motive behind the 1988 Education Reform Act; and I can see some merit in the current procedural changes in the functioning of health authority hospitals (although both reforms
have been and continue to be devalued by political buffoonery). What went before, however, hardly justifies lectures to the Third world on good governance! If you think I exaggerate let me point out that there are districts in Africa with a higher immunization rate for under-fives than in many inner city areas of the UK and there are also Salvation Army schools there whose 'O Level' pass rate would shame some London Boroughs.

As far as the government of the UK is concerned, good governance appears to be someone else’s problem. The UK pursued the idea at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe this year, and made a notable advance in securing a Commonwealth doctrine of good governance. When it came to the Queen’s Speech however, good governance registered only as a prospective condition for overseas aid. Perhaps the Citizen’s Charter is the domestic version?

A declaration of good intent – which is the most that can be said as yet for the Charter – about standards for certain public services, whether provided by the state or simply funded or subsidized by the state, is an admirable initiative. With determination on the part of ministers and their departments, and the necessary funds, we could as a nation begin to make up for years of indifference and neglect, under governments of all shades. I suggest, however, that a little more home-work needs to be done at the centre before Citizen’s Charter equates with good governance. A Citizen’s Charter which – for example – guaranteed to maintain the value of the pound, or even the ECU, in your pocket and guaranteed compensation for excessive delay in the administration of justice would be something different again. I did not, incidentally, find a reference to the Royal Commission on the Judicial System in the Citizen’s Charter.

Here I should like to offer a new hypothesis: that the effectiveness of a Citizen’s Charter depends upon enforceability in the courts. Can we connect the 1990s concept of a Citizen’s Charter with the 1980s concept of Judicial Review? I raise the question ‘What is the test of a good Citizen’s Charter?’ The answer I offer is ‘it is in every respect justiciable’, i.e. open to redress in the High Court. Surely this is a reasonable test to apply?

Such a test would of course, get some of our less perceptive legislators into trouble. For example, my local MP whose annual report has just been put through my door, proclaims under a ‘Charter for Passengers’ that ‘the days of misery for road and rail users are numbered.’ Now there is much to be said for getting the trains (clean of course) to run on time. But that was, after all, an achievement credited to a Fascist Dictator in the 1930s. Which brings me back to a ‘public service that is efficient’ not being in the canon of good governance. It was, thankfully, a Jew who pointed out to us in the British Council seminar that the Holocaust was, no doubt, facilitated by an efficient public service. A contemporary example illustrates that same point: a public service that can identify among candidates for senior academic appointments those who listen to the BBC World Service, and thereby reject them, has a certain competence. You can, no doubt, see where ‘bad music’ is going to enter into the argument.

An efficient public service cannot of itself secure good governance; it can indeed
be used against good government. What the World Bank was saying, I believe, was that you cannot have good governance without it, and that I subscribe to.

ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM

The UK civil service has been engaged in administrative reform more or less continuously since the Fulton committee reported in 1968. There were, of course, reform initiatives before that, notably the re-training of civil servants in The Conduct of Public Business, which followed the Crichel Down fiasco. However, for much of that time these reforms were not crowned with much success, if success is measured by better performance in public services.

Nevertheless we are credited in the UK with having a better civil service than we had twenty-five years ago and, even more importantly, we are credited with a Civil Service that has been a material factor in the transformation of the UK economic and social scene in the 1980s. You can choose for yourself whether the transformation is for better or worse, but the credit is certainly there. We are repeatedly asked by other governments - how it is done? My response to that, in my role as a UK government adviser, boils down now to asking three further questions of them - and giving them UK-based answers as a starting point for their consideration. These questions are: (a) what is a civil service for (b) what is a civil service in a plural democracy and (c) how can a professional civil service be created?

I. What is a civil service for?

This question seems to me to be straightforward. The answer I gave a new democracy and its new, and very young Prime Minister, who asked for our help in creating for his country a 'British' civil service, was that the function of a professional civil service in a multi-party or plural democracy is:

i. To inform ministers and Parliament - with complete and accurate data, presented objectively and in time.

ii. To advise ministers - by analyses of data and appraisal of options in which they can have confidence.

iii. To implement ministerial decisions and to administer the resultant legislation.

iv. To account to ministers and Parliament for their actions (or inaction) - with particular reference to the safeguarding of public funds and ensuring effective value-for-money.

II. What is a civil service in a plural democracy?

This is a more testing question, and reveals a very real problem in emerging democracies when a single party state moves towards political plurality and democracy and the civil service has to lose its party identity and serve a national, not partial interest.

The best answer I can offer is that a professional civil service has five key attributes:
i. It is based on the merit principle.
ii. It guarantees financial probity.
iii. It respects political neutrality and impartiality under the law.
iv. It is committed to serve any government well.
v. It is accountable at all levels.

All these attributes sound easy to achieve, but none is easy to achieve in the adverse conditions common to the new democracies. Thus, in one such country the constitution calls for a 'balanced civil service', i.e. balanced as between racial groups. Is this to be made compatible with the merit principle? How can financial probity be consistent with the starvation wages paid to civil servants in some countries? If basic human rights are ignored, can a civil service profess to be totally neutral and impartial? Should a professional civil service serve with commitment if government declines into tyranny? How can a civil service be accountable if there is no democratic and effective government and legislature to account to? When it comes to defining a professional civil service, we are fortunate in the UK – since we have had a long time in which to evolve our answer.

III. How to create a professional civil service?
I now confront an even more difficult question. In the UK we have been developing a professional civil service for nearly one hundred and forty years, since the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms of 1854, through a process of administrative direction and convention. We are currently putting it through the mincing machine of 'agency' development, which a World Bank official described as 'a revolution in Civil Service management'. What should Hungary or Bulgaria do? Or Namibia, Poland and Laos, when they want what we take for granted and need it tomorrow? What useful answer can we in the UK give? One answer is to send a copy of Estacode, the Civil Service Orders-in-Council and Videos of the Yes Minister series (each of these has been seriously proposed). Another, all too familiar, answer is to send in the experts. One country had received 43 experts and had accumulated a debt of several million US dollars over seven years to pay for them when I went there with a colleague in response to a request for advice. I confess I have no simple answer as to how a new democracy grows its own UK style civil service.

One of our former Prime Ministers, James Arthur Balfour, pointed out that British institutions could not be assumed to work elsewhere in the absence of the 'British humour'. So, a becoming modesty and disarming simplicity might be especially relevant. This brings me to the Caribbean calypso in my title, which was part of an attempt on my part to by-pass the constraint of 'British humour' and convey a simple practical message to a foreign government aspiring to administrative reform in our image.

GOOD PIANO DON'T PLAY BAD MUSIC
I have tried to distil guidance on administrative reform into four simple precepts. The UK reader will recognize the first two from our domestic experiences:
i. *If it ain't broke don't fix it; if it is broke, don't polish it* – attributed to Mrs Thatcher, but I confess to adding the last bit myself.

ii. *Don't make it perfect, make it Tuesday* – frequently quoted by Lord Rayner in his path-breaking role as Mrs Thatcher's Efficiency Adviser.

iii. *Ownership is vital* – administrative reform cannot be created by an external presence, no matter how authoritative. It has to belong to those working with it, and should be firmly embossed 'country of origin is country of application'. The first chapter of the Fulton committee report is a perfect example in our own UK experience of how to destroy a good case: by stridently anathematizing the existing civil service managers at the highest levels, it alienated them and they never were committed to reforms which were really needed.

iv. *Good piano don't play bad music* – I confess to authorship of this.

I hope that the point I am making in this last precept is obvious. A public service is not, in a proper sense, efficient, no matter how capable and well-tuned, if it is serving ends which are wrong by ministerial design or incompetence. Examples are legion around the world. I invented my calypso because I wanted to impress the point on a Prime Minister who aimed for a good public service but had plenty of bad music about.

Let me give four examples of bad music in this sense:

i. Publicly financed housing which is allocated not by need but by tribe, or party, or religion.

ii. Surplus public land and property expected to be sold to political friends at below market price.

iii. Public policy established on the suppression of information which would invalidate it.

iv. Public assets allowed to rot by deliberate oversight (or simple unawareness of the fact that neglect costs money).

If ministers do these things, or condone them, or ignore them, what is the value of administrative reform?

You might by now have guessed that I would choose examples like these not from the Third World, but from the UK. I am referring to the allocation of council houses in Northern Ireland in the 1960s, to the sale of surplus hospital land in London in the 1980s, to the concealment of the true costs of nuclear power generation until the City flushed it out in the course of privatization; and to the deliberate neglect of the maintenance of the public estate since the Second World War. If we can do these things in the UK – and we did – we must surely be careful in what we say to the Third World and Eastern Europe about good governance and administrative reform.

The question with which I wish to end – and the most difficult question of all – is one that goes to the heart of good government – where is the safeguard against bad music? Can the good piano, the efficient and well-tuned public service, really refuse to play it? Will it refuse? On the evidence, no it won’t always, not even in the UK.
Occasionally, the individual civil servant can, quite properly, prevent bad
government. The accounting officer can refuse to go along with letting the political
friend have a below-market price. The Head of the Statistical Service can refuse
to leave publishable data concealed. There are other examples of a similar kind
known to me in the UK. But it is easier to take that kind of stand in our, well-
established, service with its strong conventions. In the new democracies, something
more is needed. Here I pin my hopes on what may prove to be the most important
administrative reform in the UK since the Second World War: the new public audit
machinery. This consists first and foremost of the National Audit Office (NAO)
and the Audit Commission. Their wide powers of investigation and their wide
remit to go into Value-for Money as well as probity are crucially important. Even
more important is the backing of a Public Accounts Committee. I also include
in the new audit machinery the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration
and the Health Services Commissioner, with their wide powers of investigation,
and their Select Committees.

This may seem a surprising conclusion to be put forward by a former Accounting
Officer – the victim, as it commonly seems, of a hostile and pressing Public
Accounts Committee of the House of Commons. But the reality is that this
accountability of the Accounting Officer to the Public Accounts Committee is his
principal weapon against political expediency. As an Adviser on Administrative
Reform to several governments in very different situations, I see real difficulty in
offering as a standard model our own civil service structure and practice; there
is too much convention and sophistication. The principles are sound and worthy
of implanting in an alien context, but only as a basis for domestic development.
The Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office on the other hand,
are already well established in an international context. If their counterparts are
functioning, there is hope of improvement; but if they are not, there is little hope.
An effective public audit system also answers the third part of the World Bank
definition of good governance, that the public service is accountable to the public.

My reflections on these matters have, as you see, led me into some real conundrums, which are still topical here in the UK, and in some countries are urgent for
action. When put together, they present a formidable examination paper, especially
for new emergent democracies, but also and perhaps, as importantly, for us in the UK:

i. What is good governance?
ii. Can we claim to have it in the UK – and if not, why not and where
might it be found?
iii. How does the Citizen's Charter and its related activities fit in? Or is it
something else?
iv. What is a civil service for and what are its essential qualities for the UK?
Are they the same for all the world?
v. If 'an efficient public service' does not exist, how can it best be built?
vi. How far does such an efficient public service go in underpinning good
government? and how far does it go, should it go, can it go in preventing
bad government?
vii. Is not the best ally of good governance, and the best defence against bad music, not the civil service alone but also the new audit machinery and Parliament's own institutional oversight of administration?

I am sure that there are many answers to these questions but I give the final word to Balfour: 'It is unfortunate, considering that enthusiasm moves the world, that so few enthusiasts can be trusted to speak truth.' I hope my enthusiasm for our British civil service is manifest. I believe I have spoken truly.

REFERENCES