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## THE BRITISH CIVIL SERVICE

## I—PERMANENT, INDEPENDENT AND INFLUENTIAL

By Our Special Correspondent

One hundred years ago to-day Sir Stafford Northcote and Sir Charles Trevelyan put their signatures to their report on the Civil Service. It was one of the most creative and revolutionary documents of the nineteenth century, pointing the way to the creation of a permanent Civil Service, independent of the patronage of politicians and holding office during good behaviour. "The creation of this Service," wrote Graham Wallas with barely any exaggeration, "was the one great political invention in nineteenth-century England." Even to-day, visitors and delegations from all over the world come to study it.

The Civil Service is now so much accepted by both politicians and people that the principles on which its influence and authority rest are rarely stated and almost never questioned. The fundamental principle is that non-elected officials should (within a democracy) "exert some amount of independent influence." To the British, who preserve not only a Monarchy but a Monarchy with important constitutional functions, this principle may not seem startling. But in fact it is a denial of the logic of democracy—the deliberate provision of a check to democracy.

It is the establishment and eventual acceptance of this principle which is involved in the story of the Northcote-Trevelyan report. The public Service during the first half of the nineteenth century was the creature of patronage—or, as one modern historian has put it, the "outdoor relief department of the aristocracy." There was nothing remarkable in the case which Edward Romilly found in the Board of Audit of "a gentleman being appointed who could neither read nor write. He was almost an idiot, and there was the greatest possible difficulty in getting him out of the office." The Civil Service was the sanctuary of the unambitious and the indolent or incapable.

## STRUGGLING ALONG

The departments managed to struggle along, just avoiding disaster, partly because the functions of government were largely negative and partly because in certain important offices and in other offices at moments of crisis mature administrators were brought in from outside. Moreover, this was still an age when Ministers had more time for governing themselves. Palmerston, Peel, and Gladstone, in Graham Wallas's words, "were all magnificent administrative athletes." The Government clerk was a subordinate official—superseded, as Trevelyan pointed out, because he was incompetent, and incompetent because he was superseded.

But great changes were in the air. The functions of government were becoming more and more positive. As royal commissions and bluebooks followed one after the other, as the Chadwicks and Shaftesburys got to work, as the philosophy of Jeremy Bentham worked like leaven in the minds of a post-1832 generation, as the spirit of science began to be felt abroad, a new conception of the State was taking shape. The events of 1848 had been a shock to the complacent, and almost as soon as the Northcote-Trevelyan report was published the almost disastrous failure of British administrative methods in the Crimean War brought further shocks.

Even so, when the reforms were first put forward, politicians and even the best public servants were horrified. Either, like Sir James Stephen [called "Mr. Over-Secretary" of the early Victorian Colonial Office], they did not comprehend the need for a new kind of administrative talent—he could not understand why any "man of ability would submit himself to an arduous examination in order to earn a post so ill-paid, obscure and subordinate" as that of a Government clerk—or, like Stephen's contemporary, the statesman Sir James Graham, they realized that it meant the end of the reign of patronage—and "I am not certain that Parliamentary government can be conducted on such principles of purity."

## REPORT OPPORTUNE

But the report had arrived at the right time—just when the transition from aristocratic to democratic government was taking place. When the borough householders were enfranchised in 1867, the old ruling class saw that patronage was in danger of passing from its hands to those of the local party bosses. On the other hand, the newly enfranchised classes had not yet come to recognize the importance of patronage. In these circumstances the appointments to the Civil Service could be "rescued from private patronage without becoming public spoils."

Historically it is no accident that the first serious attempt to apply the principles of the Northcote-Trevelyan report was made by Gladstone (who 17 years earlier had asked Northcote and Trevelyan to make their inquiry) in 1870, three years

after the 1867 Reform Act. To-day the independence of the Civil Service—which through more than 80 years has nourished the finest traditions of loyal and impartial service to Ministers—is to almost every British person a source of pride. There is no serious person who would like to alter its foundations.

For this reason it is possible to discuss the reputed impartiality of the Civil Service without fear of destroying the prestige which is essential to it. There is no questioning the loyal service which Civil servants give to succeeding Ministers of all parties, irrespective of their politics. There is probably not one Minister or former Minister who would dissent from the judgment given by Mr. Attlee in the House of Commons in March, 1948: "We always demand from our Civil servants a loyalty to the State, and that they should serve the Government of the day, whatever its political colour. That undertaking is carried out with exemplary loyalty."

This, however, is a tribute to the Civil servant's honesty rather than his impartiality. Those who question the impartiality of the Civil Service are not thinking so much of the loyalty or integrity of individual officials as of the "inarticulate major premises" on which Civil servants—and, indeed, whole departments—act. It is said, for example, that the Foreign Office under Sir Robert Vansittart was Germanophobe and Francophile; that during Ernest Bevin's handling of the Palestine problem it was consistently pro-Arab; that before 1933 the Treasury was dominated by the principles of Gladstonian finance; and that to-day in the Treasury and the other economic departments there is a great weight of set opinion in favour of a convertible pound.

## ABLEST OF MEN

There is, in fact, something that can be called Civil Service or departmental opinion. This is only to be expected. The highest Civil servants are able men—some of the ablest of their generation. They have spent 20, 30, or 40 years in practising the art of government. It is not surprising that they develop—and that departments develop—attitudes, both conscious and unconscious. There is no point in denying that these fundamental assumptions or premises exist or in suggesting their existence is a serious criticism of the Civil Service.

As Ivor Jennings has emphasized, "senior Civil servants are intelligent persons, and intelligent persons recognize their bias and do their best to articulate their premises." This is particularly true of Civil servants, whose work constantly imposes on them the need to state and examine their premises: no Civil servant can offer advice to his Minister or present the arguments for and against a particular course of action without making his own premises perfectly plain.

Much depends on how strong an individual Minister is. If a Minister is run by his Civil servants, that is no fault of the Civil servants but a criticism of his own feebleness. It may be retorted, however, that even the strong Minister has to consume much nervous energy in fighting departmental opinion. This is certainly sometimes true, but it is scarcely a criticism. The whole theory of the Civil Service is that it should meet the half-formed, sometimes ephemeral, schemes of politicians with a "wall of experienced opinion."

## SLOW PROMOTION

The emphasis is on the word "experience." The Civil Service is the depository of each department's experience. It would not be performing its function if it did not draw its opinions and its assumptions largely from experience. For this reason, Civil Service and departmental opinion may sometimes seem to be behind the van of informed opinion and some of its assumption out of date. In so far as this is a criticism, it is unavoidable. Promotion to the highest posts in the Civil Service is slow, and those who at any moment are in the highest posts have usually received their education some 30 or 40 years before.

But this is a minor point. The major point is that once one accepts the conception of a Civil Service which is both independent and permanent one accepts also that it will exert some independent influence. That influence can either be exerted by men who are given to following their own fancies and chasing new ideas, or it can be exerted by men whose whole training ensures that their own opinions will develop as part of a slowly evolving body of departmental or Civil Service opinion. There is no doubt which is the more valuable—and the less dangerous.

(This is the first of a series of four articles on the Civil Service, on the occasion of the centenary of the signing of the Northcote-Trevelyan report; the second article will appear to-morrow, November 4.)

# THE BRITISH CIVIL SERVICE

## II—CHOOSING AND TRAINING THE POLICY-MAKERS

By Our Special Correspondent

This second article is concerned with Civil servants as policy-makers, with the few men and women of real authority and influence who are to be found in the senior ranks of the administrative class. Their function, in the simplest terms, is to make the machinery of government work. It is in this that they are—or should be—experts. If, by the time they reach the level of Under-Secretary, they do not have “a feeling for what is practicable in British government,” then they lack the essential skill of the higher Civil servant. It is a skill which can be learned only by practice and thorough application over many years. From the first day when, as an assistant principal, the Civil servant takes up the familiar green folder and drafts a reply to a member of Parliament, he begins to learn that there is more to the conduct of public affairs than the application of pure reason. His education as a Civil servant has begun.

### AN OPEN MIND

But what of his education beforehand? The “mandate” given to the Civil Service Commissioners, and confirmed by experience, is to be found in a famous passage of the Northcote-Trevelyan report:

We believe that men who have been engaged up to two or one and twenty with studies which have no immediate connexion with the business of any profession, of which the immediate effect is merely to open, to invigorate and to enrich the mind, will generally be found in the business of every profession superior to men who have at eighteen or nineteen devoted themselves to the special duties of their calling.

One of the great Civil servants of this century, Sir Oswyn Murray, went to the Admiralty as a young man with a first in classical moderations, in greats and in jurisprudence, and with the added distinction of being Vinerian Scholar. He remained at the Admiralty all his life, being its Permanent Secretary from 1917 until his death in 1936, and was one of the Navy's most notable civil administrators and reformers. It is not surprising to find him making much the same point as Northcote and Trevelyan, though in different terms. He was addressing a body of young men:—

We hear too much nowadays about the impossibility of fitting a square peg into a round hole. The world will not carve a hole to fit each one of you. What your education should be doing is to enable you to fit into any hole for which the world needs you.

Just because, on this occasion, Sir Oswyn Murray was speaking as an ordinary citizen and not as a Civil servant, his words shed a revealing light on the assumptions of the traditional Civil servant. The Civil Service Commissioners are not looking for “experts,” or even for specific persons to fill specific posts. They are recruiting, from the material available to them by the open examination recommended by Northcote and Trevelyan, the men and women most suitable for the general task of running the machinery of government. The Commissioners' relations with the departments and especially with the Treasury are very close, but the important principle remains that they are selecting men and women for a general Treasury class—another Northcote-Trevelyan recommendation—and not for particular posts in individual Government departments.

### ‘AMATEURS’ AND EXPERTS

This principle is so fundamental to the British Civil Service that criticism of it seems heretical. Yet the criticism is sometimes heard—perhaps more often to-day than ever before—that the search for the intelligent amateur is no longer relevant to modern needs. If it foreshadows the pressing of the claims of the “expert” against those of the general administrator, the creation of the Scientific Civil Service since the beginning of the war may yet prove to be the most significant development in the organization of the Civil Service since 1920. It is said, for example, by some who are not unqualified to judge, that the lack of economic expertise in the great economic departments is a serious drawback; that a British Treasury delegation will, for this reason, always be at a disadvantage when meeting an American Treasury delegation.

Clearly there is substance in this criticism. But the remedy is probably already at work. It is, after all, only comparatively recently that the study of economic subjects has made great progress in British universities; and it is not unreasonable to believe that those now rising to the senior ranks in the Civil Service are more familiar with economic ideas than the generation which has preceded them. Some confirmation of this is to be found in the most recent report of the Civil Service Commissioners: one-third\* of the successful candidates appointed to the Treasury, the Board of Trade, and the Ministries of Labour and Supply between 1949 and 1952 had taken degrees in either economics or (at Oxford) philosophy, politics and economics. This is a reasonable proportion.

A second criticism of the methods of recruitment to the administrative class

which has been commonly made in the past is that the successful candidates are drawn primarily from those who have been able to go to independent public schools. In so far as it is a criticism, it is of the educational system and not the Civil Service Commissioners, for no one seriously suggests that recruitment to the administrative class can be from others than university graduates (except, of course, those promoted at a later age from another class). If the universities draw heavily on the public schools, so through the universities must the Civil Service.

### THE NEW RECRUITS

The latest published figures of the Civil Service Commissioners are enlightening on this point. They show a remarkable change from 1939, when 43 out of 67 successful candidates for the administrative class and Foreign Service came from public schools. In the years since the war the proportions have been more than reversed. The names of the schools which the successful candidates of 1951-52 had attended before going to a university tell the story more eloquently than can any figures:

|                                      |                                      |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Abbotsholme, Rocester                | Mill Hill                            |
| Almondsbury Grammar, Huddersfield    | Morgan Academy, Dundee               |
| Andover Grammar                      | Mount School, York                   |
| Bancroft's, Woodford                 | Newport High (Boys)                  |
| Bembridge                            | Newport (St. Julian's) High (Boys)   |
| Bemrose, Derby                       | Perse                                |
| Beaumont College, Windsor            | Pinner Grammar                       |
| Bryanston                            | Queen Elizabeth's Grammar, Wakefield |
| Canford, Wimborne                    | Raven's Croft, Eastbourne            |
| Cardinal Vaughan, Kensington         | Ratcliffe College, Leicester         |
| Charterhouse                         | Reigate Grammar                      |
| Cheltenham Ladies College            | Repton                               |
| Chingford County High                | Rugby                                |
| Christ's Hospital                    | St. Aloysius's College, Glasgow      |
| City of London (2)                   | St. Christopher's, Letchworth        |
| Dagenham County High                 | St. Edward's, Oxford                 |
| Eastbourne College                   | St. Marylebone Grammar               |
| Edinburgh Academy                    | St. Mary's College, Crosby           |
| Eton (3)                             | St. Olave's Grammar, S.E.1 (2)       |
| Fettes, Edinburgh                    | St. Paul's                           |
| George Heriot's, Edinburgh           | St. Peter's, York                    |
| George Watson's, Edinburgh           | Sedburgh (2)                         |
| Hamilton Academy                     | Sherborne                            |
| Hawick High                          | Shrewsbury                           |
| Heanor Grammar                       | Slough High (Girls)                  |
| Hemsworth Grammar                    | Stowe                                |
| Hurstpierpoint (2)                   | Tiffin Boys', Kingston               |
| Kensington High                      | Tonbridge                            |
| Kilburn Grammar                      | Uppingham                            |
| Kilmarnock Academy                   | Wellington College                   |
| King Edward VII, Sheffield           | Wellington, Somerset                 |
| King Henry VIII, Coventry            | Westminster City                     |
| Lewes County                         | Wigan Grammar                        |
| Liverpool Institute High             | Wimbledon College                    |
| Manchester Grammar                   | Winchester (3)                       |
| Marlborough                          | Worthing High                        |
| Merchant Taylors'                    | Whitgift, Croydon                    |
| Merchant Taylors' (Girls), Liverpool |                                      |

The same story is to be found in the lists of successful candidates for 1950-51 and 1949-50. The new recruits to the administrative class are coming overwhelmingly from grammar, county, and high schools all over the country.

### LEARNING BY PRACTICE

Once he has entered the Civil Service, the new recruit to the administrative class must receive his main training by the practice of his craft. There is no other way by which he may learn the skills of his occupation—such as the ability “to get quickly at the real gist of a mass of papers” and “the power to select the one crucial point from a multitude of relevant facts and arguments.” There is no other way of acquiring the instinctive judgment which tells him what can be said or done and what cannot. There is no other way of learning a proper respect for precedent and for established procedure—both of which are essential in the Civil Service. As he gathers experience he will gather also an understanding not only of the machinery of government but also of the nature of Government actions—how even an apparently trivial slip may involve his Minister in difficulties in the House, how every important act “is sure to have results, often very grave results, which no one foresaw.”

From time to time proposals are made, such as those of the Assheton Committee during the war, to improve the training of the administrative class officers accepted. Whatever may be said in favour of them, they should not be allowed to distract attention from the main problem of recruiting the right type of person. For once he is recruited he will be able to absorb all the important training that is necessary as he works—“on the job”; and he will be a man of sufficiently wide culture, and with friends and acquaintances in the outside world, not to lose touch with it. Because the Civil Service is hidden away from the limelight, a myth has grown up that its officers lead a cloistered life. No one who has had to deal regularly with Civil servants will support such a legend. They tend, on the whole, to be more aware of the world outside their domains than their counterparts in business, in the universities, or in any of the professions.

(This is the second of a series of four articles on the Civil Service, on the occasion of the centenary of the signing of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report; the third article will appear to-morrow.)

# THE BRITISH CIVIL SERVICE

## III—INCREASED TASKS AND TREASURY CONTROL

By Our Special Correspondent

This series of articles has been concerned so far with the function of Civil Service in policy-making. The other most controversial side of its work is its relations with the public. To-day, when the State watches over the citizen from the womb to the tomb and exercises a rigorous control over the country's economy, it is of vital importance that the Civil Service should appear to the public efficient, helpful, and sympathetic. The pensioner with a grievance as much as the industry which believes it has a special claim, the trader awaiting a licence as much as the poverty-stricken awaiting an award for National Assistance—all these are the Civil servant's public, entitled to be treated in the spirit of real service.

### NEW FUNCTIONS

One of the main sources of public grievance is the conviction that the Civil Service is over-staffed. No one outside the organization can speak confidently on this question, but it seems unlikely—though a constant watch is indispensable—that there is any general over-staffing in the headquarters offices of the departments. The Treasury's control here, both in theory and in practice, is too rigorous and too effective. Moreover, it is as well to bear in mind that all significant changes in the sizes of staffs of Government departments follow changes in Government policy—and, therefore, changes in function. Significant increases and reductions in staff are the consequence of policy. This is clear in the following table, which is limited to the departments in which significant changes in the sizes of staffs have taken place since 1939.

CHANGES IN SELECTED DEPARTMENTS

|                                   | 1949<br>as %<br>of<br>1939 | 1953<br>as %<br>of<br>1939 | 1953<br>as %<br>of<br>1949 |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| TRADE, INDUSTRY,<br>TRANSPORT:    |                            |                            |                            |
| Agriculture .. .. .               | 708                        | 526                        | 74                         |
| Food .. .. .                      | —                          | —                          | 50                         |
| Fuel and Power .. .. .            | 1,447                      | 564                        | 39                         |
| Labour .. .. .                    | 115                        | 89                         | 78                         |
| Trade .. .. .                     | 295                        | 178                        | 60                         |
| Transport .. .. .                 | 248                        | 191                        | 79                         |
| SOCIAL SERVICES:                  |                            |                            |                            |
| National Insurance .. .. .        | —                          | —                          | 87                         |
| Pensions .. .. .                  | 386                        | 292                        | 75                         |
| REVENUE DEPARTMENTS:              |                            |                            |                            |
| Inland Revenue .. .. .            | 195                        | 209                        | 107                        |
| FOREIGN AND IMPERIAL<br>SERVICES: |                            |                            |                            |
| Foreign Office .. .. .            | 401                        | 322                        | 80                         |
| DEFENCE DEPARTMENTS:              |                            |                            |                            |
| Admiralty .. .. .                 | 239                        | 257                        | 107                        |
| War Office .. .. .                | 175                        | 200                        | 111                        |
| Air Ministry .. .. .              | 128                        | 133                        | 104                        |

The expansion of the Foreign Office is noticeable. So, too, are the increases, for obvious reasons, in pensions and, to a smaller extent, in the defence departments. But much the greatest changes are to be seen in the departments which are responsible for controlling the country's economy, and that the present Government's policy of freeing the economy has resulted in considerable savings in staffs in these departments. The Ministries of Food and Fuel and Power and the Board of Trade, which have been most closely affected by the progressive abolition of controls and rationing, all show substantially higher reductions in staffs since 1949 than the other departments in the list.

### CONTINUOUS SCRUTINY

Besides these great reductions in staffs due to policy changes, any saving by mere administrative efficiency is bound to seem small. Yet it must be achieved where possible. Apart from the Treasury control over increases in staff, the development of Organization and Methods since 1942 has been laboriously—necessarily so—but remarkably successful. The Organization and Methods division in the Treasury and the Organization and Methods branches in the main departments have begun to supply the continuous and detailed examination of the working of the Government's executive machinery which has been looked for by every commission or committee inquiring into the Civil Service since 1914.

The Treasury Organization and Methods Division, though it cannot issue instructions to other departments, is the headquarters of Organization and Methods work throughout the Civil Service, and we have it on the authority of the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury himself that "if we felt in the Treasury that O. and M. was languishing in a particular department, I certainly should not hesitate to get hold of the Permanent Secretary in that department and tell him that I thought so; in fact, I have done so in certain instances." This bland assertion of the Treasury's enormous informal authority has been nicely capped by Mr. I. J. Pitman, formerly Director of Organization and Methods at the Treasury. When he asked

the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury what sanctions existed to secure the ends of O. and M. in other departments, "he answered my question on the ultimate authority: 'In the final resort I will write to the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry. If he doesn't do what we want, I'll ask him round here for tea and a chat. If it's an obdurate case, I'll send out and get a small piece of cake with the tea.'"

It is not possible in the compass of this article to inquire in detail into the working of Treasury control. With some confidence, however, it can be stated that Treasury control, whether formal or informal, whether the sanction is an Order in Council, the power of the purse or merely a piece of cake, to-day works almost wholly to the good. The old dog-fights between the Treasury and the other departments are not entirely things of the past, but they no longer dominate their relations. The Treasury to-day is no longer negative in carrying out its functions, as the Haldane Committee found it to be in 1918, and "the closer personal relations with the several departments with which it has to deal," to which that Committee looked forward, have been established.

There is one aspect of the staffing of departments which is, in practice, beyond effective Treasury control. This is the staffing of the local offices. And it is here, one suspects, that there has in recent years been the most waste. The total wastage may not be great, but the pregnant mother who has had to go to two separate offices—Food and National Insurance—can have no very high opinion of the efficiency and considerateness of the Civil Service, especially if she finds idle clerks at both. It is at these offices that the great majority of people get their impressions of the Civil Service, and their efficient organization should be a matter of high priority.

### "OVER-THE-COUNTER"

In the "welfare state" these local offices are bound to be a permanent and important feature. There would seem to be an urgent need for a radical inquiry into the whole question of their organization—leading possibly to a radical solution. Some attempt is now being made to examine them and their staffs, but the general need remains to concentrate the local and regional offices of departments as much as possible—and, in particular, to find some way of combining the local staffs of the various departments which are giving "over-the-counter" services, such as Food, National Insurance, Labour and National Assistance.

This is the kind of work which Organization and Methods is well qualified to carry out. After the war it was largely responsible for changing the whole procedure for issuing passports, achieving an immediate reduction in the staffing of the Passport Office from 1,100 to 700 and—equally important—speeding up the whole process for the citizen. One of the main features of the new procedure was to seek the cooperation of the Ministry of Labour so that passports could be issued through local employment offices—by the normal Ministry of Labour staff. This would seem to point the way to the sort of remedy that is generally required for duplication and redundancy.

The success of the Organization and Methods work—and the support which it has from the Treasury—is instructive of the changed attitude to these questions in Whitehall. It has simplified forms, reduced the number of forms required (in one case—those demanded from an average builder in a year—from 144 to 36), and assisted departments in a hundred and one ways to overhaul their organization. There is no doubt of the active intelligence which is now being brought to the elimination of what the public calls "red tape"—and of the growing willingness of departments to cooperate.

But the question remains—and it is a crucial one—whether more would not be achieved if there were some motive power at a higher level. The Civil Service has adapted itself remarkably well to its enormous new functions since the war. But it has been an adaptation by *ad hoc* improvisations. It is clear that the expansion of functions has provided a subject for the widest review. Organization and Methods may be the obvious instrument for such a review, but it needs behind it a higher and wider authority. Whether a junior Minister—on the same level as the Financial Secretary—who was able to give his undivided attention to the domestic problems of the Civil Service would provide the needed motive power is open to many questions. But the need is there.

[This is the third of a series of articles on the occasion of the centenary of the signing of the Northcote-Trevelyan report on the organization of the Civil Service; the fourth and last article will appear to-morrow.]

# THE BRITISH CIVIL SERVICE

## IV—CENTURY OF GROWTH WITHOUT BUREAUCRACY

By Our Special Correspondent

The British Civil Service has changed much in recent years, but the fundamental principles which Northcote and Trevelyan laid down 100 years ago remain unchallenged. In the intervening 100 years the whole structure of the "welfare state" and the apparatus of economic controls has been built up, but the Civil Service has been able to adapt itself again and again because of the wise foundations on which it was itself created.

At times the machinery has seemed to creak badly. It did so in the years immediately after the war, and if the Government of the day had not had so large and submissive a majority in the House of Commons the administrative failures of many departments might have become political issues. There is no doubt that the Civil Service has now regained much of its efficiency. The transitional period, which involved the exodus of more than 200 temporary Civil servants from senior positions and an unusually large number of changes among the permanent officials, has passed.

### GROSSLY OVERLOADED

But there has been another change, which is the concern, not of the Civil Service, but of the politicians. The machinery of government was grossly overloaded after the war. "Successive Parliaments," wrote Mr. I. J. Pitman, formerly Director of Organization and Methods at the Treasury, in 1948, "pile further Pelions on the ever-growing Ossa." He held that "Parliament never, and Government scarcely ever, seem to consider means when considering policy."

The British Civil Service is not a suitable body for the detailed and physical control of the country's economy from the centre. In wartime much can be done which in peacetime would not be possible or tolerable. This is why it was possible to recruit distinguished men from outside and put them to work without much fear of difficulties or friction. In wartime the art of government is little practised. The things which have to be done are done, and no one cares very much how.

Yet, even in wartime, the attempt to run the nation's economy in detail from the centre—though inevitable—had its disadvantages. Professor Robbins has given his own account of the mere practical difficulties, and has drawn a vivid picture of the wretched Civil servant waiting in the waning light of evening to see a harassed Minister. Any system of physical controls must mean queues outside—of traders seeking licences or of housewives at the food office. It also means queues in the Minister's ante-room.

### PARLIAMENTARY CONTROL

If the Civil Service were to be asked to control permanently and in detail the economic life of the nation, the implications would have to be accepted too. There would have to be a drastic diminution of the supervision exercised by Parliament—as there was during the war and during the life of the 1945-50 Government with its overwhelming majority. It is not often realized outside that the result of Parliamentary supervision is that Parliamentary business must take precedence in the departments. As Sir Henry Dale put it:

Though thousands of acres may be on the point of being flooded, or the Governor of a colony may be anxiously awaiting instructions, the Minister or the Parliamentary Secretary must have in good time the draft reply to a question.

This degree of Parliamentary control, which no member of Parliament would be willing to forfeit, and no ordinary citizen would like to see forfeited, is incompatible with a system which imposes on the Civil Service the day-to-day control of the nation's economy.

There would also have to be a relaxation of Treasury control in the matter of staffing. Physical controls, licensing and rationing mean more and larger local offices, to which Treasury control does not properly reach. Above all, the country would have to resign itself to an inefficient Civil Service. Every power of control, licensing or rationing involves Civil servants throughout the country in daily decisions about individual cases and claims. These decisions have to be taken in the light of the obligation to give common treatment to all H.M. subjects, "irrespective," in the words of Mr. Pitman, "of geography, of time, and even of the repeated dishonesty of the subject."

The sardonic reference to "the repeated dishonesty of the subject" is not irrelevant. Controls breed in the citizen a disposition to try to evade controls. This increases the difficulties of the Civil servants. "In the past," Mr. D. N. Chester has said, "the British people have to a large extent administered themselves; it was seldom a case of officials having to apply extensive sanctions." The administrator, he urges, should pause to think before imposing a system which, by

making wooden and foolish decisions unavoidable, encourages "more people than usual to place their own interpretation on what is legally right or wrong." The spy is the product of the over-controlled and over-centralized economy.

This is a lesson which has to be read constantly to politicians to-day because the real threat to the efficiency of the Civil Service is not to be found within its organization, but in the failure of Parliaments and Governments to "consider the impact of the practical on the desirable." Mr. Pitman has pointed out that the investigation of the Select Committee on Estimates in 1946-47 into organization and methods was a by-product of their investigation into the arrears of work in the Inland Revenue for P.A.Y.E.

and if ever there was a case in which Parliament has imposed an unwieldy and unnecessarily complex task upon the Civil Service it is the income tax provisions which under P.A.Y.E. have to be applied weekly. A task involving 14,000,000 annual cases ought clearly to be organized as a routine. Yet there are no less than 8,192 possible variants of the main conditions imposed by Parliament cutting across the routinization of the already considerable variables in (i) degree of income to be taxed, (ii) rate of tax to be applied, and (iii) name and address of taxpayer.

Politicians ask themselves far too seldom what functions the central machinery of government is capable of performing. The Board of Trade is one of the favourite butts of the critics of Civil Service organization. Its wide responsibilities, its size and the geographical diffusion of its organization lead some to conclude that its work would be more efficiently performed if it were divided. This is a characteristic fantasy of the paper reformer. There is very little increase in efficiency to be had from a reallocation of functions between departments, whatever the Haldane Committee, from its remote eminence, may have said.

### THE WRONG FUNCTIONS

The need is, not to reallocate functions, but to relate functions to the capacity of a centralized organization. If there has been a weakness in the Board of Trade's administration during recent years, it has been that it has been asked to perform the wrong functions. It has been asked to undertake work which involves a day-to-day interference with the economy of the country which no central machinery of government—in a democracy—is fitted to exercise.

Even Mr. Chester, normally an especially acute observer of the Government machine, once unjustly blamed "some in the administrative class" for having "but the vaguest idea of how to use the price system":

They are inclined to think either that they have no control unless there is some machinery of application, approvals, &c., or, if they are brighter, they associate price movements as necessarily involving inflation . . . . It is hard to believe that the chronic fuel situation could not have been eased by some moderate use of the price mechanism; . . . . Instead of a heavy increase in the tax on petrol large staffs are used to deal with applications for comparatively small individual allowances. . . .

These words—Mr. Chester was writing in 1948—should obviously have been directed, not at the administrative class, but at Parliament and the politicians. The two examples he gives—the price of coal and of petrol—would at the time have been major political decisions. It was Parliament which had committed itself to physical controls and scorned the use of the price mechanism. It was from the politicians—from the Cabinet—that the initiative should have come to replace physical controls by "a moderate use of the price mechanism"—as it has come in the more recent past.

### A GREAT ACHIEVEMENT

The argument in this article is necessarily controversial. But it cannot be answered merely by saying: "Well, let us have a still larger and more efficient Civil Service." The influence, authority, and wide responsibility of the Civil Service—of a permanent body of officials—are only tolerable in a democracy as long as Parliamentary supervision can be, and is, close and constant. That supervision would be impossible if the Civil Service were to be permanently involved in the detailed control of the country's economy. Britain would know—for the first time—the evils of a central bureaucracy. Hitherto the great achievement of the British people has been to entrust power, influence, and responsibility to the Civil Service without a bureaucracy growing up. The achievement should not be lightly thrown away.

(This is the fourth and last article in a series on the occasion of the centenary of the signing, on November 23, 1853, of the Northcote-Trevelyan report on the organization of the Civil Service; the earlier articles appeared on November 23, 24, and 25.)

PORTRAIT GALLERY

WORLD CIVIL SERVANT



[Specially photographed for THE SUNDAY TIMES by DOUGLAS GLASS

Dag Hammarskjöld

WHEN, last April, Mr. Dag Hammarskjöld was chosen as Secretary-General of the United Nations a new stage was registered in the progress of the "managerial revolution." For this Swedish lawyer-economist is not a politician, but a political technician—in which he differs from his predecessor, Mr. Trygve Lie. Although he is the son of a Conservative Prime Minister and for sixteen years held important offices in his country's Department of Finance and Foreign Ministry, he has never belonged to a political party; and this detachment, perhaps as much as his acknowledged skill in negotiation and administration, made him acceptable to both the Western and Eastern members of the United Nations.

Still a bachelor at forty-eight, Mr. Hammarskjöld finds relaxation in ungregarious pleasures—solitary mountaineering, reading poetry (Rilke and Eliot are among his favourites), and the enjoyment of abstract painting. But these preferences have not made him a desiccated intellectual.

He spent his first month as Secretary-General

visiting every office in the huge United Nations headquarters building and shook hands with every employee. He found his staff depressed and anxious because of charges of "subversion" and, as a first step towards dispersing their gloom, gave a party for 4,000 of them, with such celebrities as Marion Anderson and Danny Kaye to provide entertainment. By the end of the evening the host and the comedian were on "Hammy" and "Danny" terms.

A more enduring stimulus to staff morale has been given by Mr. Hammarskjöld's firm and tactful handling of the difficult question of "security," meeting legitimate American anxieties, but establishing the United Nations as master in its own house.

Last week Mr. Hammarskjöld paid his second visit to London as Secretary-General—he was here for the Coronation—making the journey from New York for the sole purpose of addressing an Albert Hall meeting. It was evidence of the strength of his conviction that the future of the United Nations rests on "intimate and personal contact with all peoples."